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# THE LITERARY CRITICISM OF G. K. CHESTERTON

by

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ABSTRACT

Many commentators have observed that G. K. Chesterton had a unified outlook on life. He saw everything in the cosmos from the same cohesive point of view. This thesis examines his major works of literary criticism: Charles Dickens, Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens, Robert Browning, Robert Louis Stevenson (1927), The Victorian Age in Literature, William Cobbett, Chaucer, George Bernard Shaw, and William Blake in the light of Chesterton's philosophy.

Chesterton's outlook on life causes him to emphasize the cheerful optimistic side of Dickens; and he suggests that such cheerfulness was an anachronism: the survival of merry England in the nineteenth century. The optimism of Dickens is important for Chesterton because it was a sign of hope for the depressed classes amid the Malthusian gloom of Victorian England. Both Browning and Stevenson were also cheerful optimists compared with most of their contemporaries; and Chesterton insists that they did provide an answer to Victorian despair. In The Victorian Age in Literature our critic examines some of the great nineteenth century writers, and

attempts to show how their various compromises, and the Victorian compromise in general, were doomed to failure. He considers that Cobbett was a pre-Victorian who foresaw the social weaknesses of the Manchester school, and who suggested a sound solution for the coming economic ills. Cobbett's solution, according to Chesterton, was a return to the ordered society of Chaucer's England. This was the pattern of society that Chesterton himself recommended in his lifelong debate with Bernard Shaw and the Fabians. When he wrote on Blake he did not attempt to make the mystical poet a propagandist for "orthodoxy" and Distributism, but nevertheless he does insist that Blake "was on the side of historic Christianity."

The "Conclusion" attempts to place Chesterton in relation to the main groups of twentieth century critics. It is shown that he is a "classical" moralist critic, and that as such he is in a long tradition of English literary criticism, and that he shares the concerns of some of the major critics of this century.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

There is a unity of Chesterton's mind and ideas; he sees everything in the universe from his own particular point of view. Whether one agrees with that point of view or not, Chesterton's writings on any topic, from penny dreadfuls to the pentateuch, enlighten the reader. Chesterton wrote that Dickens' novels "are simply lengths cut from the flowing and mixed substance called Dickens."[1] This phrase is certainly applicable to its creator, for all of Chesterton's books are cut from the one piece of material, all of his writings are informed by his own philosophy.

Many critics have noticed the unity of Chesterton's thought. Maisie Ward's "definitive" biography of Chesterton, for example, traces the unity of his outlook from his schooldays, through Orthodoxy, to his conversion to Roman Catholicism, and on to the time of his death. Maisie Ward considers that he saw everything in the light of his own philosophy: "Gilbert said once he was willing to start anywhere and develop from anything the whole of his philosophy."[2] "The thread of thanksgiving"[3], suggests Miss Ward, was the clue to his life and thought. Indeed, despite the popular view that Chesterton is a writer who deals in paradox and casual criticism, most of his commentators have been aware of the underlying consistency of his work. As early as 1915 Julius West realized the unity of Chesterton's writings:

> In spite of Chesterton's liberal production of books, it is not altogether simple to classify them into "periods," in the manner beloved of the critic, nor even to sort them out according to subjects. G.K.C. can (and generally does) inscribe an Essay on

> the Nature of Religion into his novels, together with other confusing ingredients to such an extent that most readers would consider it pure pedantry on the part of anybody to insist that a Chestertonian romance need differ appreciably from a Chestertonian essay, poem, or criticism.[4]

Half a century later Wilfred Sheed comments on Chesterton's unity of thought: "he never altered his basic stance in relation to ideas. In matters of pure intellectual judgement, Chesterton had absolute integrity and permanence."[5] Even Chesterton's hilarious fantasies, his detective stories, and in fact everything he wrote after 1908, D. B. Wyndham Lewis notes "are built on a strong coherent philosophy."[6] Similarly, F. A. Lea observes the consistency of Chesterton's writings: "Each of his works is an organic unity. . . .But what applies to his individual productions applies to his achievement as a whole."[7] And on the subject of Chesterton's "vast body of literary criticism," Garry Wills, one of the most recent commentators on Chesterton's work, writes: "A profound unity informs all these judgements, no matter how scattered or occasional, on literature."[8]

A second group of critics, observing the unity of Chesterton's thought, seem to consider that religion was the basis of its unity. Belloc's view that the whole of Chesterton's "expression and action were the story of a life's religion "[9] is shared by critics like Alfred Noyes, Herbert Palmer, Emile Cammaerts, Christopher Hollis, and John O'Brien. In 1914, Noyes, for example, insisted on the religious attitude which informs Chesterton's work: "Mr. Chesterton finally shows that all his inconsistencies are rooted in an ultimate consistency, that all his critical improvisations are based on the secret and eternal harmonies."[10]

Summarizing the obvious characteristics of Chesterton's school of poetry, Herbert Palmer speaks of

> robustiousness, rapture, medievalism, Roman Catholic Christianity, the exaltation of the humble and homely, traditional music, the cult of the tavern, songs of liberty. It was also characterized by Puritanism. Indeed Chesterton, who pretended to be the great opponent of Puritanism, rode his hobby-horse with a rather grinning mouth and a long tongue in a very bulging cheek. For the essence of Puritanism is the putting of the Christian religion into all the deeds of daily life, speaking about religion in daily speech and writings, the cultivation of sex purity in celibate and family life. It is this last which is the plainest badge of the Puritans.[11]

One need not accept Palmer's somewhat unscholarly definition of Puritanism, but Palmer is surely correct in saying that Chesterton put the Christian religion into all the deeds of daily life.

Again this view is supported by Emile Cammaerts,[12] who writes that Chesterton's thought is primarily concerned with good and evil, man's rights and duties as an individual and as a citizen, and man's salvation. Cammaerts suggests that although we might expect inconsistency, we do not find it.

> He had the prophet's fertile eloquence, his burning zeal, and his sincere consistency. We should not claim a systematic doctrine from an author indulging in every kind of writing, from comic nonsense to theology, and should not be surprised if he were, from time to time, carried over the line of scrupulous truthfulness by his delight in sketching caricatures or coining epigrams. When considering Chesterton's collected works, we should at least expect to find a rich disorder, a change of moods, a clash of contradictions, similar to that which we find in the writings of the great Romanticists, such as Byron or Hugo. It is somewhat surprising to be confronted throughout with a perfectly logical attitude. Indeed we might say of Chesterton what he says of Shaw: 'You may attack his principles but you cannot attack their application.' He puts the Chesterton test to everything that happens in heaven or earth. The 'fortress' which he holds looks remarkably like a gothic church, with the company of heaven standing on guard round the porch, and the monsters of hell relegated to their proper place, among the gargoyles grinning on the roof.
>
> It would be impossible to understand the doctrine of Chesterton without emphasizing this element of consistency. Once brought to the faith through criticism of the various heresies which attracted him in his youth, he takes his stand on Christian orthodoxy -- that is to say, on the teaching of the Gospel as interpreted by Catholic

philosophy.[13]

Likewise Christopher Hollis finds religion to be the unifying fact of Chesterton's life. Hollis also points out that his conversion to Catholicism in 1922 did not make any fundamental difference to his outlook.

> . . .problems of religion wholly overshadowed all other problems in his mind. Indeed, to him politics and literature and all the other activities of man were only of importance in so far as they could be made of service to the cause of religion. His reception into the Catholic Church, although it was to him immensely the most important event of his private life, had little effect on his literary development. For the religious problems which he had cared to discuss had always been the large questions of the being of God and Man and Christ rather than the precise details of the nature or residence of authority.[14]

John A. O'Brien also comments on the unity of Chesterton's writings: "From first to last, through polemic, poem and novel, he never ceases to uphold the humanity of the Cross; and we can think of no fitter title for him, nor would he desire one, than the last of the Crusaders."[15]

Finally, Chesterton himself, commenting on his point of view and his purposes, insists that behind the apparent contradictions is a single aim:

> I began by being what the pessimists called an optimist; I have ended by being what the optimists would very probably call a pessimist. And I have never in fact been either, and I have never really changed at all. I began by defending vermillion pillar-boxes and Victorian omnibuses although they were ugly. I have ended by denouncing modern advertisements or American films even when they are beautiful. The thing that I was trying to say then is the same thing that I am trying to say now; and even the deepest revolution of religion has only confirmed me in the desire to say it.[16]

Alan Handsacre dissents from all the critics quoted above and from Chesterton himself. He writes: "It is not difficult to defend orthodoxy, provided that you are not concerned about the consistency of the various

parts of your defence with each other. But the brilliance of your inconsistency does not make it consistent."[17] Handsacre, a Rationalist Agnostic, points to some of the weaknesses of Chesterton's methods of argument, and shows that there are sometimes inconsistencies in these methods. More often he selects an illustration Chesterton has used to support his argument, and applies it in a way that was never intended. The main weakness of Authordoxy, however, is that Handsacre attempts to use reason in a vacuum, without basing it on premises or experience; therefore, it is not surprising that he fails to undermine the philosophy of Orthodoxy. Of course one may deny Chesterton's premises, or one may produce different empirical evidence, but one cannot largely ignore these things and hope to produce a sound argument.

It is apparent then that, with the exception of Handsacre, most critics are agreed that Chesterton's thought and writings make a unified whole. His books of literary criticism are necessarily included in this general statement, but thus far no one has examined this criticism in detail in order to trace its unity. This thesis will scrutinize Chesterton's major books of literary criticism to show how these books illuminate Chesterton's thought, and how Chesterton's thought illuminates these books.

FOOTNOTES -- CHAPTER I

[1]G. K. Chesterton, Charles Dickens (London, 1960), p. 66.

[2]Maisie Ward, Gilbert Keith Chesterton (Harmondsworth, 1958), p. 196.

[3]Ibid., p. 400.

[4]Julius West, G. K. Chesterton: A Critical Study (London, 1915), p. 23.

[5]G. K. Chesterton: Essays and Poems, ed. Wilfred Sheed (Harmondsworth, 1958), p. 16.

[6]G. K. Chesterton: An Anthology, ed. D. B. Wyndham Lewis (London, 1957), p. xiii.

[7]F. A. Lea, "G. K. Chesterton," Modern Christian Revolutionaries, ed. Donald Attwater (New York, 1947), p. 154.

[8]Garry Wills, Chesterton: Man and Mask (New York, 1961), p. 56.

[9]Hilaire Belloc, On the Place of Gilbert Chesterton in English Letters, (London, 1940), p. 12,

[10]Alfred Noyes, "Dickens and Mr. Chesterton," Charles Dickens, Bookman extra number (London, 1914), p. 202.

[11]Herbert Palmer, Post-Victorian Poetry (London, 1938), p. 159.

[12]Emile Cammaerts, The Laughing Prophet: The Seven Virtues and G. K. Chesterton (London, 1937), p. 2.

[13]Ibid., pp. 32-33.

[14]Christopher Hollis, G. K. Chesterton (London, 1950), p. 20.

[15]John A. O'Brien, Giants of the Faith: Conversions Which Changed the World (New York, 1960), p. 241.

[16]G. K. Chesterton, Autobiography (London, 1936), p. 330.

[17]Alan Handsacre, Authordoxy: Being A Discursive Examination of Mr. G. K. Chesterton's "Orthodoxy" (London, 1921), p. 23.

## CHAPTER II

## CHESTERTON THE WRITER

### I

Chesterton was a man of letters: he wrote poetry, essays, plays, biography (of his own particular variety), autobiography, "fantastic" novels, theology, sociology, ethics, philosophy, satire, political pamphlets, introductions to many books, articles in newspapers and periodicals, art criticism, and literary criticism. Throughout all his critical writings Chesterton's philosophy informed his approach to any writer. In this second chapter then, it is necessary to examine Chesterton's mind and ideas, so that the basis of his criticism may be understood. This thesis is mainly concerned with Chesterton's major books of literary criticism on Dickens, Browning, Stevenson, the Victorian Age, Cobbett, Chaucer, Shaw, and Blake; in addition his numerous essays on other literary topics are used to support the argument.

A useful distinction for considering Chesterton's literary criticism is provided by the Times Literary Supplement, February 23, 1962, which divides critics into two main categories: the classical critics and the experimental critics.[1] The classical critic attempts to discover and convey the total significance of a work of art; he deals with the whole impression; he points out the obvious; he is not concerned with the minutiae. The experimental critic, on the other hand, examines methods, stanzas, and lines. T. S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis, Dr. Johnson, George Saintsbury, and Matthew Arnold are classical critics. I. A. Richards,

William Empson,[2] and a host of lesser writers are experimental critics.

Chesterton is a classical critic in so far as he deals with a whole work; in fact, he more usually concerns himself with the complete corpus of a writer rather than with any particular work. Chesterton is concerned with an author's philosophy, and with the intellectual and sociological background of the times when the man lived. He certainly does not believe in art for art's sake. Chesterton, like Eric Gill, considers that art must be based on some view of the world. Art must say something to man: ". . .the artist is a person who communicates something."[3] The artist should not be a remote aesthetician living in a circle of admiring friends. Such an atmosphere circumscribes the impact of the artist. Yet precisely this atmosphere seemed to Chesterton the characteristic of his times: "A relative and reasonable degree of sympathy between the world and its works of art is more and more rapidly disappearing today."[4] He does not wish to leave the "common people" behind; and he thinks it a pity that a clique of sympathizers takes up a budding poet and explains his poems while they are only half formed, while they are buds and not flowers. Instead of clarifying his ideas the poet will go on writing obscure verse because the critic with insight will be able to see into the poet's ideas, and will praise the poet for being suggestive. So the poet will continue merely to hint at a meaning instead of becoming a "builder of the bridge." Yet the poet is successful only "when the bridge is completed and the word is spoken; above all when it is heard."[5] Chesterton himself was a popular writer enjoyed by the man in the street; a journalist proud of his trade. He entered journalism by accident at the turn of the century, and rose to fame rapidly by startling his readers with paradoxical ideas. For nearly

forty years he continued to use the tricks of his journalistic trade to propound his doctrines: to insist that the capitalist-socialist system was evil, to reiterate that there were such things as the rights of man and that poor men had these rights, and to assert that Christian dogma was the basis of social happiness. To the annoyance of some of his readers, Chesterton repeated himself ad nauseam. The repetitions are understandable because despite his popularity, he was often misunderstood; even after his death people were still unsure of what his beliefs were, and why he held them. Towards the end of his life he lost some of his humour, and a tone of desperation can be found in his writing.

The repetitions of Chesterton are due to three causes: first, his enormous literary production; second, his belief in the value of what he had to say, and his desperate desire to convince his readers; third, his unity of thought. Before any detailed discussion of his literary criticism, then, it is necessary to understand the unity of Chesterton's religious and political ideas. To separate the religious from the political thought of Chesterton is to divide one thing.

## II

F. A. Lea writes of Chesterton:

> Each of his works is an organic unity: the whole is implicit in each one of its parts.
>
> But what applies to his individual productions applies to his achievement as a whole. To present his viewpoint becomes, therefore, inordinately difficult; 'a kind of huge helplessness' overtakes one. Since to separate any one strand of his thought and treat it in isolation is immediately to impoverish it. Yet to link up each with all the others, save by implication, would be a superhuman task, involving endless repetition and final formlessness.[6]

In his literary criticism, as indeed in all his writings from detective stories to travel books, Chesterton's "orthodox" religious opinions and Distributist beliefs are the viewpoint from which he sees his subject. The artist must serve mankind; and Chesterton makes the artists he admired serve his ends, even if they would be most surprised to find themselves supporters of Catholic peasant proprietors. Again and again in the following pages we shall find Chesterton making the authors he is writing on serve to illuminate his own beliefs.

Chesterton was fully aware of lifelong unity of his own thought. He added a chapter to the 1935 edition of George Bernard Shaw, in which he wrote:

> "A liar must have a good memory, to remember what he has said; but a bigot, a fanatic, a man fixed in one dogmatic scheme of faith (like Bernard Shaw and myself) need not bother to remember what he has written. He knows that it was all true; because he has not altered his fundamental test of truth.[7]

Chesterton knew that he would agree with his own earlier views; he knew himself to be consistent. The careful reader will find very few instances of any change of intrinsic viewpoint in Chesterton's works. True, his allegiances changed: politically he was a socialist, became a Liberal, and ended his life as a Distributist; religiously he was brought up in the liberal wing of the Church of England; during the Slade Art School period of his youth he became a complete sceptic -- a sceptic who toyed with Spiritualism, and a planchette; later he became an Anglo-Catholic, and he ended his life as a Roman Catholic. Yet apart from the art school period of his life, Chesterton remained the same; he changed his allegiances because he discovered that the former ally did not stand for what he believed in. He abandoned socialism when he realised that the Fabians

would dictate to the poor. The bureaucrats would insist that poor little girls have clean heads, and therefore pass laws to cut the hair short that the head should be clean. But Chesterton would defend the hair of the she-urchin: ". . .all around her the social fabric shall sway and split and fall; the pillars of society shall be shaken, and the roofs of ages come rushing down; and not one hair of her head shall be harmed."[8] Gilbert Chesterton left the Liberal Party after Hilaire Belloc and Cecil Chesterton wrote The Party System revealing the corruption of the men who ran the English Political parties, and when Gilbert was convinced that the Liberals were anything but liberal. In spite of all these apparent changes Chesterton knew himself to be consistent; he wrote, "I have never really changed at all."[9]

The 1914-18 war interrupted the progress of Chesterton's changing political and economic allegiances. During the war he was a loyal Englishman, though he did not belong to the "my country right or wrong" school. In spite of his devotion to the English war effort, Chesterton could not blind himself to the injustice of the English government to Ireland. He thought that the war would open the eyes of his countrymen to their sins: he wrote a book called The Crimes of England, and he rejoiced with Belloc in the English alliance with France against Prussia. Chesterton exulted because the war proved that the English poor were not decadent; Tommy Atkins in the trenches showed himself to be a true descendent of the men who fought at Agincourt. Chesterton thought that the war justified all his anti-pacifist opinions. The fervent patriotism of Cecil Chesterton supported his brother's convictions. At the end of the war Cecil died of trench fever in France. For the rest of his life

Gilbert believed that it was his duty to his brother to publish an independent paper, a paper that would fight political corruption and spread the Distributist gospel. When the war was over Chesterton and the New Witness fought the English governing plutocracy. They hoped to spread property and wealth. Later G. K.'s Weekly and the Distributist League disseminated these ideas (see Appendix).

Both during his life and since his death, many people have thought that Chesterton was a socialist, and a follower of Shaw. In Bernard Shaw Chesterton points out why critics considered him a disciple of Shaw: both men were criticising the same evils of industrial capitalism. They had, however, very different antidotes for the ills of society. The Fabians, with a puritanical heritage, wished to organise the poor for their own good. Chesterton, on the other hand, considered that the poor with their traditions, prejudices, songs, jokes, beef and beer were healthier and nobler than the atheist-spiritualist, socialist, vegetarian, Jaeger-suited nudist teetotallers who wished to impose Prussian efficiency on the workers. Indeed, he would prefer German measles to German efficiency. H. G. Wells remarks: "Every time he [Chesterton] lifted a glass of wine he lifted it against Cadbury."[10] Likewise one feels that every mouthful of beef Chesterton consumed was savoured with the sauce of Shaw's vegetarian prejudices. Chesterton's love and respect for the poor are clearly evident in his introduction to the Life of Will Crooks, the working class Labour M. P.:

> You have not yet seen the English people in politics. It has not yet entered politics. Liberals do not represent it; Tories do not represent it; Labour Members, on the whole, represent it rather less than Tories or Liberals. When it enters politics it will bring with it a trail of all the things that politicians detest;

> prejudices (as against hospitals), superstitions (as about funerals), a thirst for respectability passing that of the middle classes, a faith in the family which will knock to pieces half the Socialism of Europe. If ever that people enters politics it will sweep away most of our revolutionists as mere pedants.[11]

## III

Before examining his individual books of literary criticism it will be useful to consider Chesterton's style, his way of life, and then (in the light of what we know of his philosophy, style, and way of life) his reasons for choosing the authors about whom he writes.

Chesterton's style is marked by certain funny little ways. Some readers are annoyed by these mannerisms, but Chesterton's enormous popularity proves that most people do find his funny little ways funny. The most famous stylistic trick of Chesterton is his use of paradox. He insists that the world is paradoxical, and he is always prepared to explain his paradoxes. For example, in Bernard Shaw we find the following:

> But the truth is that the very rapidity of such a man's mind makes him seem slow in getting to the point. It is positively because he is quick-witted that he is long-winded. A quick eye for ideas may actually make a writer slow in reaching his goal, just as a quick eye for landscapes might make a motorist slow in reaching Brighton.[12]

Then Chesterton applies this paradoxical idea to Shaw, and goes on to explain it at considerable length. Another example of paradox, one of hundreds scattered through Chesterton's books, occurs in Robert Louis Stevenson: "Now of all human things the search for health is the most unhealthy."[13] On the basis of this paradox, Chesterton explains how Stevenson's mind remained healthy, even though he journeyed round the world seeking health. Of course, paradoxes like this are usually quite valid. Because Chesterton had a reputation as a paradox-monger, it seems

that when he constructed a new one he thought it out carefully. It is not difficult to uncover patches of loose thinking in Chesterton's writings, but I believe that most of his paradoxes will stand up under close scrutiny. His contemporaries were divided into two camps about his paradoxes: one side agreed with Dean Inge in the judgement, "'Chesterton spent his life crucifying Truth upside down.'"[14] The other camp took the more lighthearted attitude of Oliver Hereford:

> When plain folks such as you and I
> See the sun sinking in the sky,
> We think it is the setting sun;
> But Mr. Gilbert Chesterton
> Is not so easily mislead;
> He calmly stands upon his head,
> And upside down obtains a new
> And Chesterertonian point of view.
> Observing thus how from his nose
> The sun creeps closer to his toes
> He cries in wonder and delight.
> How fine the sunrise is tonight![15]

Another of Chesterton's tricks of style consists of taking some ordinary phrase of the man in the street, or a well known quotation, twisting it to a new and unexpected meaning, and building on it throughout an essay -- most of Chesterton's books can be cut into essay-length sections -- or he may construct a passage so that it leads up to such a phrase. And though one might come to feel this is a mannerism, surely F. A. Lea is over critical when he writes: ". . .the tawdry crescendoes that end one chapter after another of Chesterton's Chaucer can leave a very sour taste in our mouths. They are incongruous, and to a sensitive and interested reader they may be intolerable."[16] We can see Chesterton's use of the well known phrase in the following three examples from Charles Dickens: first, at the end of Chapter I, we are told to "recreate the

faith of our fathers if only as an artistic atmosphere," to leave pessimism behind when reading Dickens, and to "abandon hopelessness, all ye who enter here;" second, at the end of Chapter IV, the gullibility of Mr. Pickwick is described as "the key to all adventures," for Pickwick the greenhorn "will be always 'taken in;'" third, at the end of Chapter XI, "It [the world] is the best of all impossible worlds." The same technique occurs at the end of Chapter VII of Chaucer: "You will begin to wonder (dare we say it?) whether the great Life of the Renaissance, if it had been a little less full of sound and fury, might not have signified more." These examples are typical in coming at the end of chapters. Minor climaxes are found throughout a chapter, coming at the end of a paragraph; a major climax often ends each chapter; and many of the books end with a grand finale. Admittedly, these purple passages seem on occasion strained or mannered but more often than not they are surprisingly successful.

Another characteristic of Chesterton is his love of debate. For example, the record of his famous debate with Bernard Shaw, Do We Agree, shows that Chesterton had great mental agility when on the platform. Again, Mrs. Cecil Chesterton tells of a debate between Gilbert and Cecil that lasted eighteen hours, thirteen minutes.[17] Though the evidence of wives is not permitted in a court of law, Mrs. Cecil Chesterton thinks that her own husband was the better debater. She writes of Gilbert: "He was always at his best when he was pricked. He got under way slowly almost ponderously as a rule, but put on his mettle he rallied like a Castilian bull, tossing his opponent to the rails."[18] Because of his love of debate, Chesterton's books are filled with argument. Instead of stating his own opinion, he will often start by giving the critical views of somebody

else, and then proceed to conduct a debate with himself; in such an argument he is able to show both why he disagrees with his opponent and why he holds his own opinions.

Half a century later this debating method is often frustrating for a reader, because it is usually not clear with whom Chesterton is arguing. There is an almost complete lack of footnotes and scholarly devices in his books. The reader wonders how fairly Chesterton is presenting his opponent's argument. But the lack of scholarship has the advantages of its defects: Chesterton is readable. He was careless about details; mistaken facts can be found in many of his books; but when he was challenged on some detail of fact, his usual method of dealing with the critic was to admit the original error, and then go on to show that the true fact confirmed his ideas even more than the false fact. No one should read Chesterton for factual information; there are more facts set out in a brief article in an encyclopaedia than Chesterton gets into a three hundred page book on the same subject. Ideas were his province.

Chesterton's criticism is based on his philosophy and is directed towards his subject; the criticism may divagate, but the subject is always illuminated. A more scholarly critic would light up all parts of a subject with equal intensity. Chesterton leaves some aspects in darkness, and makes other aspects blaze: he is an uneven critic, but well worth study for the insight of genius that is so often present.

## IV

The major books of literary criticism by Chesterton are on Dickens, Browning, Stevenson, the Victorian Age, Cobbett, Chaucer, Shaw, and Blake. The reason why Chesterton chose to write on the men in this list is worth considering. All except Shaw could be used to confirm his own view of the universe. The books on Stevenson[19] and Browning were, apart from essays, the first of Chesterton's literary criticism. Why did he begin with these writers? The first line of Robert Louis Stevenson (1903) gives us a clue to the reasons for Chesterton's choice: "All things and all men are underrated, much by others, especially by themselves; and men grow tired of men just as they do of green grass, so they have to seek for green carnations."[20] At the Slade School of Art Chesterton had grown to hate the whole fin de siècle atmosphere. Stevenson and Browning were men who were not tired of life; therefore Chesterton used them to show that optimism was justified. He was convinced that the "flag of the world" was a standard for which all men must fight; so he feels at one with Browning because "existence itself in the eyes of Browning and all the great optimists is a good thing. . . ."[21]

Chesterton's affirmation of life and optimism explain why he chose to write on certain authors. His optimism is displayed in his writings, his opinions, and his way of living. He retained a childlike sense of wonder, and a childlike inability to look after himself. He was unable to handle money carefully: as a best selling author he was given an allowance of half-a-crown a day by his wife, he could not tie his own tie, he was habitually late for appointments. His appearance was Romantic: a huge man with unkempt fair hair, wearing a sombrero, draped in a flowing

cape, sporting a dropping moustache, and carrying a sword-stick. He was such an obvious eccentric that when he stopped to think in the middle of a London street the traffic would flow around him, and the drivers would smile rather than curse. Clearly then, Chesterton lived removed from what are hard realities to most people, and he did not allow facts to tyrannize his sociology. He continually praised the idea of the peasant proprietor, and imagined him joyously digging his two acres and blissfully attending to his cow; but Chesterton did not realize that the ownership of "two acres and a cow" does not necessarily imply that the peasant is in clover. Hilaire Belloc had more right to speak of the joy that comes from hard physical work and the simple life: he had sweated behind the guns on the border of Lorraine, he had felt tired on the path to Rome, he had scythed his field and "rested after all those hours."[22] Chesterton, on the other hand, did not have this practical experience; he had to depend on his imagination. His picture of what physical work was like was vivid, but not quite realistic. His imagination was of more use when it came to dealing with literature, but it falsifies the picture sometimes: Chesterton's Dickens is too much like Mr. Pickwick, Chesterton's Stevenson is too close to a boyhood dream of pirates.

The Middle Ages appealed to Chesterton's imagination. He wrote that when the Romans left Britain the people "hoped for yesterday";[23] Chesterton seems to hope for the day before yesterday, for the age before the Renaissance, for the social, religious, and philosophic cohesion of the thirteenth century. Praise of the guild system is scattered throughout his writings, but he denies that this is nostalgia for a bygone age, insisting that the guild was just a method of controlling the relations

between man and man. These views are most apparent in his books on Chaucer and Cobbett.

An author liked by Chesterton is made to agree with the Chestertonian philosophy. This is apparent in such an early work as Twelve Types (1902), a dozen essays in which Charlotte Brontë, Byron, St. Francis, Rostand, Stevenson, Scott, and even Charles II -- compared to the Puritans -- are shown to be supporters of the Chesterton outlook. At twenty-eight years old Chesterton knew that he was opposed to the pessimism of the fin de siècle, though he had not yet reasoned himself into being a Distributist or a Roman Catholic. As a schoolboy he had revelled in Walt Whitman's affirmation of life in all its variegated forms -- later he considered that Whitman expressed a mood rather than a philosophy. As a publisher's reader for Mr. Redway, who specialized largely in spiritualist books, Chesterton had become well acquainted with unconventional religions. In the chapter "How to be a Lunatic" of his Autobiography, Chesterton tells how he and Cecil played with the planchette. But after the turn of the century and the beginning of his writing career, Chesterton rejected Whitman's views and spiritualism; from that time on he chose to write on authors of whom he could make allies. Then he emphasized -- often over-emphasized -- the aspect of the man he particularly liked.

FOOTNOTES -- CHAPTER II

[1]"Kinds of Criticism," TLS, No. 3,130, February 23, 1962.

[2]In the 1961 edition of Seven Types of Ambiguity William Empson, discussing Shakespeare's line, "The singing masons building roofs of gold" (Henry V, I.ii.198), writes in a footnote: "G. K. Chesterton had praised this line, I think in one of his detective stories. He had great powers as a verbal critic, shown mainly by incidental remarks, and I ought to have acknowledged how much I was using them" (p. 113). Empson is completely correct in praising Chesterton's verbal criticism; however, there can be no doubt that if we are to distinguish "classical" and "experimental" critics Chesterton belongs in the former category.

[3]"On the True Artist," The Glass Walking-Stick (London, 1955), p. 182.

[4]"The Middleman in Poetry," Sidelights on New London and Newer York, and Other Essays (London, 1932), p. 202.

[5]"The Middleman in Poetry," p. 209.

[6]F. A. Lea, "G. K. Chesterton," Modern Christian Revolutionaries, ed. Donald Attwater (New York, 1947), p. 154.

[7]G. K. Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw (1935), pp. 256-257.

[8]G. K. Chesterton, What's Wrong With the World, p. 284.

[9]G. K. Chesterton, Autobiography, p. 330.

[10]Maisie Ward, Gilbert Keith Chesterton (New York, 1943), p. 379.

[11]George Haw, From Workhouse to Westminster: The Life Story of Will Crooks, M. P. (London, 1911), "Introduction," G. K. Chesterton, p. xx.

[12]George Bernard Shaw, pp. 1-2.

[13]Robert Louis Stevenson, p. 19.

[14]Quoted in a letter to The Listener, July 5, 1956.

[15]Quoted in "G. K. Chesterton: God's Crusader," Giants of the Faith: Conversions which have Changed the World (New York, 1960), John A. O'Brien, p. 237.

[16]F. A. Lea, p. 115.

[17]Mrs. Cecil Chesterton, The Chestertons (London, 1941), p. 27.

[18]Mrs. Cecil Chesterton, pp. 3-4.

[19]Chesterton wrote two books on Stevenson: Robert Louis Stevenson, by W. Robertson Nicoll and G. K. Chesterton, "The Bookman" Booklets No. 2 (1903), not to be confused with Robert Louis Stevenson (1927), by Chesterton alone.

[20]Robert Louis Stevenson (1903), p. 9.

[21]Robert Browning, p. 181.

[22]Hilaire Belloc, "The Mowing of a Field," Hills and the Sea (London, 1918), p. 156.

[23]A Short History of England (London, 1917), p. 21.

[24]Maisie Ward, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, p. 53.

# CHAPTER III

## CHARLES DICKENS

The reader of Chesterton's literary criticism should be constantly on the alert for distortions and insights. The distortions bend the subject closer to Chesterton's heart's desire. The insights are often related to the distortions, because Chesterton sees his subject in the light of his own philosophy. Chesterton's writings on Dickens are a good example of a blending of distortion and insight. I consider that Charles Dickens was his best book of criticism; scattered throughout the corpus of Chesterton's works are references to, and quotations from, Dickens; even his love letters to Frances Blogg mention Dickens. Because Chesterton wrote more on Dickens than he wrote on any other author, and because Chesterton's approach to Dickens is particularly revealing, I shall use his Dickens criticism as a major example of the Chestertonian technique, in the light of which the remaining works may be more readily understood.

In the hands of Chesterton, Dickens becomes an amalgam of milk-punch, Christmas festivity, optimism, love of the poor, English tradition, and anti-puritanism. Of course, all these things are aspects of Dickens, but they do not make the complete picture. George Ford suggests that "the bulky figure of G. K. C. is hiding something from" the reader.[1] What is being hidden, of course, is the more sombre side of Dickens. Chesterton knew that Charles Dickens was "a sketch, an affair of a few lines."[2] In 1906 he believed that it was necessary for somebody to emphasize the optimistic side of Dickens; because he stressed this view Chesterton

neglected equally important views. The popular conception of Dickens that exists in the minds of people who have not read him, and in the minds of some people who have, is the Chestertonian Dickens; indeed Ezra Pound was correct when he said, "Chesterton is the mob."[3] Chesterton's picture is incomplete, but it is the picture of Dickens that the mass of men prefer.

Chesterton continually makes Dickens share the Chestertonian point of view. Sometimes the two men's views do coincide; but where they do not Chesterton soon brings them together. For example, Chesterton hated the idea of evolution because it meant that the big battalions must win, and he happened to be fighting in a very small army. In "On the Alleged Optimism of Dickens" Chesterton explains that the recent failure of democracy is an effect of evolutionary theory:

> Evolution (the sinister enemy of revolution) does not especially deny the existence of God; what it does deny is the existence of man. And all the despair about the poor, and the cold and repugnant pity for them, has been largely due to the vague sense that they have literally relapsed into the state of the lower animals.[4]

Dickens helped to bring about a reformation of the condition of the poverty stricken by describing the lives of the poor as human and even happy; a pauper is a man. The success of many of Dickens' reforms was a consequence of the fact that the common title "Creatures that Still are Men" could be given to all the Dickens books about the poor. This is true enough -- a valid insight; but the reader is given the impression that Dickens would have shared Chesterton's views on evolution, and this is doubtful.

Inevitably Chesterton approved of the frequent drinks in the novels of Dickens. "Dickens approved it [drink] because it was a great human

institution, one of the rites of civilization."[5] Chesterton approves of wine because, "To healthy European philosophy wine is a symbol; to European religion it is a sacrament."[6] The reader gets the impression that Dickens shares Chesterton's exalted views of wine. But it is doubtful that Dickens would have felt much sympathy for Chesterton's poem, A Cider Song:

> The wine they drink in Paradise
> They make in Haute Lorraine;
> God brought it burning from the sod
> To be a sign and signal rod
> That they that drink the blood of God
> Shall never thirst again.

Edgar Johnson writes of Dickens:

> Inclining toward Unitarianism, he had little respect for mystical religious dogma. He hated the Roman Catholic Church, "that curse upon the world," as the tool and coadjutor of oppression throughout Europe. But it was the social and political affiliations of its organization that he fought, not its religious faith.[7]

Chesterton, the Dickens enthusiast, is not a dispassionate critic; loving Dickens, he insists that the novelist must have loved the things Chesterton admired.

Wine for Chesterton represented, among other things, Catholic tolerance, and the reader of Charles Dickens might be led to believe that Dickens was almost a pre-Catholic, or was at least, a nineteenth-century man who was one of the last to follow the old English Catholic tradition. A comparison of what Dickens and Chesterton had to say about the Jesuits will quickly remove any such notion. Dickens in Italy writes in a letter that a cake for his son has been:

> . . .detained for Jesuitical surveillance! But these fellows are -- Well! never mind. Perhaps you have seen the history of the Dutch minister at Turin, and of the spiriting away of his daughter by the Jesuits? It is all true; though, like the history of our

> friend's servant almost incredible. But their devilry is such that I am assured by our consul that if, while we are in the south, we were to let our children go out with servants on whom we could not implicitly rely, these holy men would trot even their small feet into churches with a view to their ultimate conversion! It is tremendous even to see them in the streets, or slinking about this garden.[8]

Compare this with Chesterton on the same subject. Writing of his non-Catholic youth, he says:

> The last lingering shadow of the Jesuit, gliding behind curtains and concealing himself in cupboards, faded from my young life about the time when I first caught a distant glimpse of the late Father Bernard Vaughan. He was the only Jesuit I ever knew in those days; and as you could generally hear him half a mile away, he seemed to be ill-selected for the duties of a curtain-glider. It has always struck me as curious that this Jesuit raised a storm by refusing to be Jesuitical (in the journalese sense I mean), by refusing to substitute smooth equivocation and verbal evasion for a brute fact. Because he talked about "killing Germans" when Germans had to be killed, all our shifty and shame-faced morality was shocked at him. And none of those protesting Protestants took thought for a moment to realise that they were showing all the shuffling insincerity they attributed to the Jesuits, and the Jesuit was showing all the plain candour that they claimed for the Protestant.[9]

Pickwick Papers was Chesterton's favourite Dickens book, and he showed considerable insight in his criticism of it. Mr. Samuel Weller is described as "a wit, a diplomatist, a great philosopher,"[10] as a "grotesque fountain which gushes the living waters for ever," and as one who "stands in some ways for a cheerful knowledge of the world."[11] Having pointed out some of the reasons why every reader falls in love with Sam even more quickly than Mary the pretty housemaid did, Chesterton goes on to show what is wrong with Dickens' pathos in later novels. The death of Mrs. Weller could have been a maudlin incident:

> For all I know old Mrs. Weller might have asked what the wild waves were saying; and for all I know old Mr. Weller might have told her. As it is, Dickens, being forced to keep the tale taut and humorous, gives a picture of humble respect and decency

> which is manly, dignified, and really sad. There is no attempt made by these simple and honest men, the father and son, to pretend that the dead woman was anything greatly other than she was; their respect is for death, and for the human weakness and mystery which it must finally cover. Old Tony Weller does not tell his shrewish wife that she is already a white-winged angel; he speaks to her with an admirable good nature and good sense:
>
> "'Susan,' I says, 'you've been a wery good vife to me altogether: keep a good heart, my dear, and you'll live to see me punch that 'ere Stiggins's 'ead yet.' She smiled at this, Samivel . . .but she died arter all."
>
> That is perhaps the first and the last time that Dickens ever touched the extreme dignity of pathos. He is restraining his compassion, and afterwards he let it go. Now laughter is a thing that can be let go; laughter has in it a quality of liberty. But sorrow has in it by its very nature a quality of confinement; pathos by its very nature fights with itself. Humour is expansive; it bursts outwards; the fact is attested by the common expression, "holding one's sides." But sorrow is not expansive; and it was afterwards the mistake of Dickens that he tried to make it expansive. It is the one great weakness of Dickens as a great writer, that he did try to make that sudden sadness, that abrupt pity, which we call pathos, a thing quite obvious, infectious, public, as if it were journalism or the measles. It is pleasant to think that in this supreme masterpiece, done in the dawn of his career, there is not even this faint fleck upon the sun of his just splendour.[12]

In this brief look at the Wellers, Chesterton not only gives us a valuable penetration into the role of Sam and his father, he goes on to develop a meaningful criticism of Dickens' later pathos. Too many critics have held up the pathos of Dickens for scorn, few have said where it was that Dickens went wrong.

Of Oliver Twist Chesterton says it "is not of great value, but it is of great importance."[13] Chesterton notices the inherent staginess of Dickens' writing in this book, and the essential melodrama. The tone of this novel is that of "The Blood Drinker's Burial." The characters are not real, but as stage types they are powerful: "Bill Sikes is not exactly a real man, but for all that he is a real murderer. Nancy is not really impressive as a living woman; but (as the phrase goes) she makes a lovely

corpse."[14] The importance of the book is that it establishes Dickens as a social critic. The famous part where Oliver asks for more is pathetic.

> But Oliver Twist is not pathetic because he is a pessimist. Oliver Twist is pathetic because he is an optimist. The whole tragedy of that incident is in the fact that he does expect the universe to be kind to him, that he does believe that he is living in a just world.[15]

Chesterton says that whereas a modern social critic would have made the children utterly crushed, Dickens gained our sympathy for the children by showing that the poor were still alive and struggling.

Chesterton notices that Cruikshank's illustrations have a fundamentally morbid tone. Dickens was not morbid, but had "the mere boy's love of suffocating stories of blood and darkness; of skulls, of gibbets, of all things in a word, that are sombre without being sad."[16] Here again Chesterton is making Dickens too Chestertonian. Chesterton carried a sword-stick, and a huge knife for sharpening pencils; he bought a revolver on the day of his marriage to protect his bride on the honeymoon at Ipswich! In short, Chesterton did have a boyish love of blood and thunder. But it is a mistake to say that the morbid streak in Dickens was just boyish high spirits. A similar error of judgement by Chesterton occurs in Robert Louis Stevenson: the bloody adventure of Treasure Island is compared to Wordsworth's vision of meadow, grove and stream. Stevenson like Wordsworth had a vision, a "vision of coffin, gallows and gory sabre that were apparelled in celestial light, the glory and the freshness of a dream."[17] This is too facile an explanation of what Stevenson was doing. David Daiches writes:

> That Stevenson was here [in Treasure Island] consciously exploring the desperate ambiguity of man as a moral animal is perhaps too much to say. . .but. . .the moral pattern of the work. . .transcends anything we might expect of this kind of novel.[18]

In the case of both Dickens and Stevenson then, Chesterton makes the horror too full of childlike innocence. This is surprising because Chesterton points out that the optimism of Dickens came out of a blacking-factory, and the optimism of Stevenson flowed from his pen as he swallowed the blood that flowed from his lungs. Chesterton should have realised that if horror was found in the works of such writers, perhaps the physical circumstances of their lives might have made it somewhat different from the innocent horror enjoyed by children.

Chesterton's books of criticism have been used by later writers on the topic as mines from which choice sentences may be taken.[19] One such phrase occurs in his discussion of Dickens' A Child's History of England: Dickens was "a sturdy, sentimental English Radical with a large heart and a narrow mind."[20] Holding this view of the essential Dickens, it is to be expected that Chesterton would prefer the early writings to the later. He suggests that Pickwick Papers was the masterpiece; he delights in the humorous passages of Martin Chuzzlewit and Nicholas Nickleby; he suggests that Dick Swiveller and the Marchioness are the true hero and heroine of The Old Curiosity Shop; he rejoices in the grandiloquence of Sim Tappertit. But after Dombey and Son we find Chesterton growing out of sympathy with Dickens' works, and picking up fragments in the old hearty manner to praise and glory over. Chesterton warned his readers, ". . .do not, if you are in the company of any ardent adorers of Dickens (as I hope for your sake you are) do not insist too urgently and exclusively on the splendour of Dickens's last works, or they will discover that you do not like him."[21] This is applicable to the case of George Bernard Shaw, who praised Hard Times so highly. Shaw is not showing

his love of Dickens as Dickens, but is showing his hatred of industrial capitalism as depicted by Dickens.

As mentioned above, Chesterton did not change his basic view of the universe, and seldom had to alter an opinion. A change can be seen, however, by comparing Charles Dickens, published in 1906, with the Introduction to Bleak House, written a little later. In the former, Chesterton writes: ". . .whenever he [Dickens] tried to describe change in character he made a mess of it. . . .."[22] In the Introduction Dickens is praised as a "great artist," because of the delicate way in which he depicts the gradual deterioration of Rick Carstone:

> Let anyone who thinks that Dickens could not describe the semi-tones and the abrupt instincts of real human nature simply take the trouble to read the stretch of chapters which detail the way in which Carstone's mind grew gradually morbid about his chances in Chancery. Let him note the manner in which the mere masculinity of Carstone is caught; how as he grows more mad he grows more logical, nay, more rational. Good women who love him come to him, and point out the fact that Jarndyce is a good man, a fact to them solid like an object of the senses. In answer he asks them to understand his position. He does not say this; he does not say that. He only urges that Jarndyce may have become cynical in the affair in the same sense that he himself may have become cynical in the affair. He is always a man; that is to say, he is always unanswerable, always wrong. . ..
>
> The clumsy journalist would have made Rick Carstone turn on John Jarndyce with an explosion of hatred, as of one who had made an exposure -- who had found out what low people call "a false friend" in what they call "his true colours." The great artist knew better; he knew that a good man going wrong tries to salve his soul to the last with the sense of generosity and intellectual justice.[23]

Chesterton proves conclusively that his own earlier generalization was incorrect. It is possible to select other generalizations and find exceptions to them, but that is to be expected, for Chesterton made no pretence to be a scholar. Maisie Ward writes of his reactions, or rather lack of reactions, to criticisms of Charles Dickens:

> He attends not at all to the crop of comments on his inaccuracies. One reviewer pointed out that Chesterton had said that every postcard Dickens wrote was a work of art; but Dickens died on 9 June 1870, and the first British postcard was issued on 1 October 1870. "A wonderful instance of Dickens' never-varying propensity to keep ahead of his age." After all, what did such things matter?[24]

The atmosphere of the 1890's was antipathetic to Chesterton. He does not like Little Dorrit because it has an atmosphere of hopelessness; it is the fin de siecle in 1857: ". . .we really do feel that the hero is forty-five. Clennam is certainly very much older than Mr. Pickwick."[25] Unlike Chesterton George Gissing considered that Little Dorrit was Dickens' finest book. Of course, Gissing fitted the mood of the 1890's, and it is to be expected that Chesterton and Gissing would not see eye to eye; that they hold opposite views on Little Dorrit is scarcely surprising.

Writing the introductions to the Everyman edition of Dickens' works, Chesterton found himself with his back to the wall: he had to produce some eight or nine pages on Little Dorrit. He avoids the issue to a large extent by concentrating on what the tone of the book tells of Dickens' life. This book was written in the "dark moment." The portrayal of Mr. Dorrit shows how dark the moment was; he is a portrait of Dickens' father. Yet Mr. Micawber is also a portrait of John Dickens.

> There must have been some real sadness at this time creeping like a cloud over Dickens himself. . .there must be some depression of an uncommonly dark and genuine character when a man has reached such a point that he can see only the sad side of Mr. Wilkins Micawber.[26]

Towards the end of his introduction, Chesterton remembers one part of the book he does like: "The one passage in the older and heartier Dickens manner (I mean the description of the Circumlocution Office) is beyond praise. It is the complete picture of the way England is actually

governed at this moment."[27] The consistency of Chesterton shows here; he chooses the most humorous part to praise "beyond praise." This description of the Circumlocution Office also serves the political ends of Gilbert and Cecil Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc. It is clear that Chesterton has used his Introduction to Little Dorrit as an excuse for explaining his own views on English government.

A summary of Chesterton's views on Dickens is not an easy matter. What is clear is that Chesterton is an enthusiast. By neglecting some of the gloom, some of the bitterness, and some of the unhappiness in Dickens' life and writings, Chesterton succeeded in making his subject more Chestertonian than it really was. This bias must be allowed for in the other books of criticism that are discussed below. If Chesterton liked something he made it fit into his own fold. If we are wary about accepting every word Chesterton has to say on Dickens, and if we judge each statement in the light of Chesterton's own pet theories, then his literary criticism will be valuable as well as entertaining.

In the early years of the twentieth century Chesterton felt that he must restore the happy joviality of an earlier England, which he thought had once existed -- whether the Middle Ages were potentially happier for the poor than post-Renaissance England need not concern us here. Dickens was never unpopular, but at this time he was less popular than Chesterton thought he should be. Writing in 1906, Chesterton felt that it was a duty to attempt to restore Dickens to English readers, not only for Dickens' own sake, but also because Dickens symbolized those heartier jollier times. So it is not surprising that George Ford should write of Chesterton's criticism of Dickens: "The salesmanship is superb. . ."

Ford tells of a Frenchman who had read Charles Dickens in translation, and who then set about learning English so that he could read Dickens in the original tongue. The salesmanship worked,

> but once the reader has been lured into the tent where he continues to listen to the great voice booming away with its endless reassurances, he may wonder whether he is going to see the whole show, or whether the bulky figure of G. K. C. is hiding something from him.[28]

It is clear that Chesterton did obscure a lot. For the reader of 1962, however, Chesterton is only one critic among many; the parts of Dickens hidden in the Chesterton shadow have surely been illuminated enough by a host of "experimental" critics; let us give praise to Chesterton for the parts which he first brought out into the light. Chesterton's most important contribution to Dickens criticism was to insist, in a way that can now never be denied, that Dickens is funny, is gay, is an optimist. In 1914 Chesterton was still preaching this dogma. He insists that Dickens would still be optimistic if Mr. Pickwick had fallen through the ice and drowned, or if Captain Cuttle had murdered Florence Dombey. Chesterton continues:

> There is, of course, an optimism which is evil and debasing, and to this it must be confessed that Dickens sometimes descends. The worst optimism is that which, in making things comfortable, prevents them from becoming joyful; it bears the same relation to an essential and true optimism that the pleasure of sitting in an arm-chair bears to the pleasure of sitting on a galloping horse.

Chesterton finds this bad type of optimism at the end of David Copperfield.

> Micawber would never succeed; never ought to succeed; his kingdom was not of this world. . . .To make Micawber a mayor is about as satisfying a termination as it would be to make Sir Lancelot after King Arthur's death become a pork butcher or a millionaire. . ..[29]

In 1932, towards the end of his life, Chesterton was still writing

that optimism and humour are the essential Dickens: ". . .the real comparison between Dickens the humorist and Dickens the sentimentalist, the sociologist, the realist, the reformer and all the many aspects that have been unfavourably or favourably compared with it," is that the humour comes first; ". . .his humour was the elder brother, more hardy, more mature, more expert and experienced; more genuine and more national and historic. For the English populace has lived on laughter; its substitute for religion, for property, and sometimes even for food."[30] It is easy to see why Chesterton was such a good salesman of Dickens: the latter thought of himself as the spokesman of the poor, the former, as Ezra Pound remarked, was the mob.

Alfred Noyes' panegryic of Chesterton's writings on Dickens shows the sort of enthusiasm that a member of the Dickens Fellowship might feel. Noyes writes that Chesterton's

> Mr. Pickwick is a sphere-spectacled compound of Puck and the Man in the Moon. His Mrs. Gamp was begotten on a Gorgon by Gargantua. His Mr. Pecksniff washes hypocritical hands in the Milky Way. The nose of his Mr. Stiggins outreddens the Everlasting Bonfire. . . . He spashes at a ten-league canvas with brushes of comet's hair in order to expound some of the minor aspects of Dickens; while many of the more important aspects he neglects altogether. His whole book is entirely lacking in all the fine shades and subtle distinctions of true criticism. . . . And, in spite of all this, it is a piece of undeniable genius. . . . We can declare his book on Dickens to be almost worthless as literary criticism in the same breath with which we can declare it to be quite admirable as a romantic poem of genius. . . . Mr. Chesterton finally shows that all his inconsistencies are rooted in an ultimate consistency, that all his critical improvisations are based on the secret and eternal harmonies.[31]

These harmonies are the basic Christian truths that Chesterton and Noyes thought lay beneath Dickens' outlook on life and society.

Dickens and Chesterton were in agreement on certain topics: love

of the poor, dislike of the aristocracy, and hatred of government by Circumlocution. But Chesterton's attitude to the revolutionary mob was very different from Dickens' feelings towards the mobs in Barnaby Rudge and A Tale of Two Cities. Chesterton was a revolutionary, and hated evolution; he had no time for anything broadening down from precedent to precedent. He believed that democracy might create a revolution. Chesterton ignores the evil poor people in Dickens; "Blessed are the poor," is enough for him. Dickens, who had more first hand experience, knew that all the poor were not so blessed. Yet when he was dealing with the good poor, the bad aristocrats, the government of England, the evils of industrialism, and the hypocrisy of Little Bethel, Chesterton strikes the right note about Dickens.

The religious views of Chesterton and Dickens, moreover, were not in harmony. Dickens disliked all dogma, and leaned towards Unitarianism. He considered that religious education in schools should be on broad Christian principles that could include all denominations.[32] This looseness was antipathetic to Chesterton, who considered that clear cut limits and definitions were the beginning of freedom. Of course, Chesterton realised that Dickens would not have agreed with him on a superficial level, but thought that, given a little shake and an opportunity to read G. K.'s Weekly, he would have agreed on fundamentals. Not that Chesterton is alone in making Dickens fit his own point of view: Shaw made Dickens into a socialist. In Hungary Dickens' novels are required reading in schools; apparently the Communists have made him one of theirs.

Charles Dickens and Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens give a grossly twisted view of Dickens. The Chestertonian

view is far too happy. Whether we regret it or not, Dickens did only write one Pickwick Papers. It is obvious that Chesterton did regret it, and went looking for more Pickwick in all the novels.

FOOTNOTES -- CHAPTER III

[1]George H. Ford, Dickens and His Readers (Princeton, 1955), p. 241.

[2]G. K. Chesterton, Charles Dickens (London, 1960), p. 158.

[3]G. K. Chesterton: Essays and Poems, ed. Wilfred Sheed (Harmondsworth, 1958), "Introduction," Wilfred Sheed, p. 19.

[4]Charles Dickens, p. 204.

[5]Ibid., p. 163.

[6]Ibid., pp. 162-163.

[7]Edgar Johnson, Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph (New York, 1952), p. 1133.

[8]John Forster, The Life of Charles Dickens Vol. 1 (London, 1948), p. 356.

[9]G. K. Chesterton, The Catholic Church and Conversion (New York, 1928), pp. 38-39.

[10]Charles Dickens, p. 188.

[11]G. K. Chesterton, Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens (London, 1911), pp. 21-22.

[12]Ibid., pp. 23-24.

[13]Ibid., p. 39.

[14]Ibid., p. 42.

[15]Ibid., p. 43.

[16]Charles Dickens, p. 88.

[17]G. K. Chesterton, Robert Louis Stevenson (London, 1929), p. 106.

[18]Robert Louis Stevenson, ed. David Daiches (New York, 1959), p. 12.

[19]For example: J. C. Furnas, Voyage to Windward: The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson (New York, 1951), or H. J. Massingham, The Wisdom of the Fields (London, 1945).

[20]Charles Dickens, p. 122.

[21]Ibid., pp. 138-139.

[22]Ibid., p. 70.

[23]Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens, pp. 154-155.

[24]Maisie Ward, Gilbert Keith Chesterton (Harmondsworth, 1958), p. 128.

[25]Charles Dickens, p. 172.

[26]Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens, p. 181.

[27]Ibid., p. 186.

[28]Ford, pp. 241-242.

[29]"Charles Dickens," Charles Dickens, Bookman extra number (London, 1914), p. 9.

[30]G. K. Chesterton, "The Great Gusto," The Great Victorians, ed. Ivor and Nicholson, 1932. Reprinted in A Handful of Authors, ed. Dorothy Collins (London, 1953), p. 49.

[31]Alfred Noyes, "Dickens and Mr. Chesterton," Charles Dickens, Bookman extra number (London, 1914), pp. 194-202.

[32]Edgar Johnson, p. 463.

## CHAPTER IV

## ROBERT BROWNING

Robert Browning was Chesterton's first major book of criticism. Stephen Gwynn tells how the young man of letters treated an important assignment that was to make him one of the literary figures of the Edwardian era, and to earn him an offer of the Chair of Literature at Birmingham University:

> On my advice the Macmillans had asked him to do Browning in the "English Men of Letters", when he was still not quite arrived. Old Mr. Craik, the Senior Partner, sent for me and I found him in a white fury, with Chesterton's proofs corrected in pencil; or rather not corrected; there were still thirteen errors uncorrected on one page; mostly in quotations from Browning. A selection from a Scotch ballad had been quoted from memory and three of the four lines were wrong. I wrote to Chesterton saying that the firm thought the book was going to "disgrace" them. His reply was like the trumpeting of a crushed elephant. But the book was a huge success.[1]

As a budding critic Chesterton deals with his subject more systematically than in later books of criticism. In the first chapter Chesterton writes of the middle-class background of Browning. Himself a member of the middle classes, Chesterton admired the liberal-mindedness, the tolerance, the love of order and decency to be found among that class of Victorians. Chesterton sees this class as an all important influence on the poet: "He abandoned, with ceaseless intellectual ambition, every one of the convictions of his class; but he carried its prejudices into eternity."[2]

When Chesterton came to examine Browning's obscurity, he exonerated the poet of pride: "He was not unintelligible because he was proud, but

unintelligible because he was humble. He was not unintelligible because his thoughts were vague, but because to him they were obvious" (p. 37). The truly original thinker may express his ideas while they are still his thoughts and no one else's. Therefore his language will puzzle his readers. Chesterton also denies that Browning was intellectually arrogant, and proceeds to list some of the Dramatic Lyrics and tell what they are about: "How they brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix" expresses "the daring speculation that it is often exciting to ride a good horse in Belgium;" "Through the Metidja to Abd-el-Kadr" expresses the view that "it is also frequently exciting to ride a good horse in Africa;" while "Garden Fancies"deals with "the abstruse thesis that a woman may be charming, and . . .a book may be a bore;" "The Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" tells us "that people sometimes hate each other in Spain;" and "The Laboratory" says "that people sometimes hate each other in France" (pp. 46-47).

Dealing with Browning's love Poetry, our critic suggests that it is the finest in the world because it avoids abstractions. The imagery consists of:

> . . .suburban streets, straws, garden-rakes, medicine bottles, pianos, window blinds, burnt cork, fashionable fur coats. But in this new method he thoroughly expressed the true essential, the insatiable realism of passion. If any one wished to prove that Browning was not, as he is said to be, the poet of thought, but pre-eminently one of the poets of passion, we could scarcely find a better evidence of this profoundly passionate element than Browning's astonishing realism in love poetry. (p. 48).

Chesterton points out that the description of the beloved's clothes in "A Lover's Quarrel," "would almost serve as an order for a dressmaker" (p. 50). In an essay "Browning and His Ideal" Chesterton expresses the same idea:

> No one, surely, can forget the dark and gorgeous emotion of the lover groping his way to the seaside cottage in "Meeting at Night":
>
> A tap at the pane, the quick, sharp scratch,
> And blue spurt of a lighted match.
>
> It is that blue-flaring match that burns in Browning's poetry and endures after the wreck of all the eternal stars of Shelley.[3]

Chesterton here sees Browning satisfying the critical demands of the Imagists before they existed.

In describing the illness of Miss Barrett and her psychological attitude towards it, Chesterton notes her optimism: ". . .she was a high-spirited woman, full of that silent and quite unfathomable kind of courage which is only found in women, and she took a much more cheerful view of death than her father did of life" (p. 61). Gilbert learned this attitude of admiration for the fortitude of women from the character of his mother and his wife; Mrs. Cecil Chesterton thought that the influence of Frances was bad for Gilbert, but it did help to give him a standpoint from which to appreciate Miss Barrett. He thought that the Browning marriage was an optimistic thing; Robert chose the side of life, defied the feelings of the Barrett family and medical opinion, and removed Elizabeth from her elegant deathbed. Chesterton notes Robert's sensible businesslike organization in arranging the wedding and in waiting for a week after the ceremony before leaving for the continent. The picture of Robert and Elizabeth drawn by Mrs. Betty Miller[4] is of two leaners looking for someone to lean on, and finding each other; it is very different from Chesterton's picture. Whose picture is nearest reality? Mrs. Miller wrote half a century after Chesterton, and I think that she lacked his knowledge of, and sensitivity for, the Victorians. Henry Charles Duffin

hoped that his book, Amphibian: A Reconsideration of Browning, would "do something to correct the false impressions which Mrs. Miller's perverse book aimed to create".[5] Chesterton would have sided with Duffin in the quarrel.

Chesterton is convinced that Browning is primarily a poet, not a logician or a philosopher. "Browning himself exalted poetry above all earthly things, served it with single-hearted intensity, and stands among the few poets who hardly wrote a line of anything else" (p. 17). Critics had complained that Browning's processes of thought are not "scientific in their precision and analysis." Chesterton examines the essential difference between scientific statement and poetic language: the former always means the same thing whenever it occurs, the latter's meaning depends on where and how it is used. Critics had said that Browning's poetry lacked form, Chesterton answers:

> The general sentiment expressed in the statement that he did not care about form is simply the most ridiculous criticism that could be conceived. It would be far nearer the truth to say that he cared more for form than any other English poet who ever lived. He was always weaving and modelling and inventing new forms. Among all his two hundred to three hundred poems it would scarcely be an exaggeration to say that there are half as many different metres as there are different poems. (p. 136).

Those who say that Browning's poems lack form, mean that they do not like his form. Browning the literary artist is much more important than his "mind" or his "message." Chesterton's stand on this matter, against the general mood of the members of the Browning Societies at the turn of the century, has been justified by time; today we are all aware that Browning the poet comes first.

The apparent ugliness of some of Browning's poems was "not in the

least a necessary evil, but a quite unnecessary luxury, which he enjoyed for its own sake" (p. 140). It is not surprising that Chesterton should have thought of ugliness as a luxury. For him ugliness was fascinating; at the end of The Man Who Was Thursday the detective-anarchists notice the monstrous horn-bills in the zoo, and wonder at their meaning. In many essays Chesterton refers to the Gothic gargoyles that he loved. The sun shines on the beautiful and the ugly, and both give glory to God. Chesterton's love of the grotesque is related to his optimism: "Energy and joy, the father and the mother of the grotesque. . ." (p. 148). So our critic sees Browning "re-establishing optimism on a new foundation. . ." (p. 152). However, Chesterton does not attempt to defend Browning's use of the grotesque in every place. In many places where it was inappropriate Browning contorted his language for the fun of the thing. But his "manner is as natural to him as a man's physical voice, and it is abrupt, sketchy, allusive, and full of gaps. . .. Browning is simply a great demagogue, with an impediment in his speech" (p. 156).

Words and ideas often came backwards from Browning.

> The words "tail foremost" express Browning's style with something more than a conventional accuracy. The tail, the most insignificant part of an animal, is often the most animated and fantastic. An utterance of Browning is often like a strange animal walking backwards, who flourishes his tail with such energy that every one takes it for his head (pp. 67-68).

Because of his method, Browning will puzzle the reader, but when one sees what is involved in the tail-foremost method, the whole animal can be comprehended. Chesterton was a poet as well as a critic, and this had advantages: the above image of a fantastic animal comes naturally from a poet-critic with a feeling for the method of another poet. The fact that Chesterton could successfully parody the styles of other poets indicates

that he had a firm grasp of their methods. His "Variations of an Air" contains five poems on the theme of Old King Cole, in the styles of Tennyson, Yeats, Browning, Whitman, and Swinburne. "It may be confidently asserted that only a great critic could have composed his parodies on Tennyson and Walt Whitman."[6] I think that the Whitman parody is the best:

After Walt Whitman

Me clairvoyant,
Me conscious of you, old camarado,
Needing not telescope, lorgnette, field-glass, opera-glass,
myopic pince-nez,
Me piercing two thousand years with eye naked and not ashamed;
The crown cannot hide you from me;
Musty old feudal-heraldic trappings cannot hide you from me,
I perceive that you drink.
(I am drinking with you. I am as drunk as you are.)
I see you are inhaling tobacco, puffing, smoking, spitting.
(I do not object to your spitting),
You prophetic of American largeness,
You anticipating the broad masculine manners of these States;
I see in you also there are movements, tremors, tears, desire
for the melodious,
I salute your three violinists, endlessly making vibrations,
Rigid, relentless, capable of going on for ever;
They play my accompaniment; but I shall take no notice of
any accompaniment;
I myself am a complete orchestra.
So long.[7]

We can see Chesterton's advantages as a poet critic when he discusses Browning's method in detail:

> This, then, roughly is the main fact to remember about Browning's poetical method, or about anyone's poetical method -- that the question is not whether that method is the best in the world, but the question whether there are not certain things which can only be conveyed by that method. It is perfectly true, for instance, that a really lofty and lucid line of Tennyson, such as --
>
> "Thou art the highest, and most human too"
>
> and
>
> "We needs must love the highest when we see it"

would really be made the worse for being translated into Browning. It would probably become

> "High's human; man loves best, best visible,"

and would lose its peculiar clarity and dignity and courtly plainness. But it is quite equally true that any really characteristic fragment of Browning, if it were only the tempestuous scolding of the organist in "Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha" --

> "Hallo, you sacristan, show us a light there!
> Down it dips, gone like a rocket.
> What, you want, do you, to come unawares,
> Sweeping the church up for first morning-prayers,
> And find a poor devil has ended his cares
> At the foot of your rotten-runged rat-riddled stairs?
> Do I carry the moon in my pocket?"

-- it is quite equally true that this outrageous gallop of rhymes ending with a frantic astronomical image would lose in energy and spirit if it were written in a conventional and classical style, and ran --

> "What must I deem then that thou dreamest to find
> Disjected bones adrift upon the stair
> Thou sweepest clean, or that thou deemest that I
> Pouch in my wallet the vice-regal sun?"

Is it not obvious that this statelier version might be excellent poetry of its kind, and yet would be bad exactly in so far as it was good. . . (pp. 146-148).

This passage shows Chesterton examining individual lines like an "experimental" critic, but the whole tone of the passage is far from being "experimental."

Chesterton considers The Ring and the Book to be a typical epic of the modern age, because it is concerned with small matters. The Moderns do not have a scale on which to measure the significance of things: Gissing muses over a third-class ticket; Meredith sees "a soul's tragedy in a phrase at the dinner-table;" Shaw writes lengthy stage directions to describe a parlour (p. 165, passim). The second reason why The Ring and the Book is a modern epic is that it shows a belief in the fact that every

man has a point of view. "Browning was upon the whole the first poet to apply the principle of free speech to poetry" (p. 174). Chesterton considers that the aesthetic movement had a great deal in common with Browning. The aesthetes, however, were interested in the odd little details of the universe, while Browning was concerned with the curious shape of the complete cosmos. Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Milton use their epics to show the relation between Man and God. So does Browning. Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Milton choose important and noble subjects; Browning chooses a sordid, forgotten Italian criminal trial.

Chesterton sums up Browning's philosophy in this phrase: "the hope in the imperfection of man, and more boldly. . .the hope in the imperfection of God" (p. 179). On this Browning's optimism depends. The critic takes "Bishop Blougram's Apology" as an example of how the optimistic poet works: Browning breaks the first mask of official goodness to show the evil beneath, then he breaks the mask of evil to reveal the final goodness of the bishop. Chesterton also finds optimism and realism in the fact that Browning puts some of the noblest diction and noblest meaning into the mouths of his confessing cads. All of these evasive swindlers are sure of one thing: their relation to a merciful God.

In The Victorian Age in Literature Chesterton compresses his ideas on Browning, and what he says will serve as a summary here:

> . . .he really did want to say that God had indeed made man and woman one flesh; that the sex relation was religious in this real sense that even in our sin and despair we take it for granted and expect a sort of virtue in it. The feelings of the bad husband about the good wife, for instance, are about as subtle and entangled as any matter on this earth; and Browning really had something to say about them. But he said it in some of the plainest and most

> unmistakable words in all literature; as lucid as a flash of lightening. "Pompilia, will you let them murder me?" Or again, he did really want to say that death and such moral terrors were best taken in a military spirit; he could not have said it more simply than: "I was ever a fighter, so one fight more, the best and the last." He did really wish to say that human life was unworkable unless immortality were implied in it every other moment; he could not have said it more simply: "leave Now for dogs and apes! Man has For ever.[8]

Here we can see the critic selecting four corner stones of his own philosophy: the sanctity of marriage, the complexity of life, the belief in immortality, and finally, the belief that courage in the face of death is a noble thing.

FOOTNOTES -- CHAPTER IV

[1]Maisie Ward, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, p. 120.

[2]Robert Browning, p. 16.

[3]Daily News, 1901, reprinted in A Handful of Authors, ed. Dorothy Collins (London, 1953), pp. 94-95.

[4]Betty Miller, Robert Browning: A Portrait (New York, 1953).

[5]Henry Charles Duffin, Amphibian: A Reconsideration of Browning (London, 1956), p. 308.

[6]F. A. Lea, p. 113.

[7]The Collected Poems of G. K. Chesterton, p. 46.

[8]The Victorian Age in Literature, pp. 106-107.

# CHAPTER V

## ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

The final words of the last chapter may serve to introduce this one: courage in the face of death is a noble thing. This belief of Chesterton would attract him to Stevensom, quite apart from any literary merit. But Robert Louis Stevenson (1927) does not attempt to tell the romantic life story for the thousandth time; rather it sets out to explore the mind and ideas of the writer as revealed by his writings.

Chesterton notices that Stevenson's fictional figures are clear cut, vividly bright, and highly coloured; not even the tales of Scotland are blurred by Scotch mist: the Celts are not hidden in any Celtic twilight; Stevenson "never committed a murder without making a clean job of it."[1] From where did Stevenson obtain these views of the world? Chesterton has no doubt that, "He got them from the mysterious Mr. Skelt of the Juvenile Drama, otherwise the toy theatre, which of all toys has most of the effect of magic on the mind" (p. 50). Here Chesterton is speaking straight from his own experience. Edward Chesterton produced plays with cardboard figures for the entertainment of his children; Gilbert's earliest memory was of one of these figures swaggering across a bridge to a castle, to rescue a damsel. The toy theatre was obviously most influential in developing Chesterton's romantic attitude to life, and it doubtless had some influence on Stevenson, but Chesterton writing on Stevenson has probably overstated its effects.

One of Chesterton's earliest antipathies was Puritanism. He disliked

Calvin's simplification of theology; he detested the spirit of Calvinism that had moved the seventeenth century English Puritans to banish mediaeval colour from the country; and most of all he deplored the non-religious puritanism that remained as a mood in the English speaking world. I think that Chesterton expressed his hatred of non-religious puritanism best in his poem The Song of the Strange Ascetic:

> If I had been a Heathen,
> I'd have praised the purple vine,
> My slaves would dig the vineyards,
> And I would drink the wine
> But Higgins is a Heathen,
> And his slaves grow lean and grey,
> That he may drink some tepid milk
> Exactly twice a day.
>
> If I had been a Heathen,
> I'd have crowned Neaera's curls,
> And filled my life with love affairs,
> My house with dancing girls;
> But Higgins is a Heathen,
> And to lecture rooms is forced,
> Where his aunts, who are not married,
> Demand to be divorced.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Now who that runs can read it,
> The riddle that I write,
> Of why this poor old sinner,
> Should sin without delight --
> But I, I cannot read it
> (Although I run and run),
> Of them that do not have the faith,
> And will not have the fun.

Because of his attitude towards puritanism, Chesterton was quick to feel the influence of it on Stevenson and Shaw. The latter remained a puritan all his life according to Chesterton, but Stevenson was torn between Cummy's early religious influence, and his own early reactions. His reaction as a child was "to experiment with blasphemy, deliberately going off by himself to say the unsayable."[2] His reaction as a youth was to

explore the shebeens of Edinburgh. The Puritan and the wastrel were both present in Stevenson, and many critics have pointed out their presence in Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Chesterton notices that the setting in that story, though supposed to be London, is pure Edinburgh. Chesterton considers the moral of Jekyll and Hyde to be that though evil may neglect good, good may not neglect evil. The chief defect of the Calvinist morality, as far as Chesterton is concerned, is that it "saw no difference between the worst and the moderately bad" (p. 71). The ideal development for man is from childhood fairy tales to a romantic youth; if Stevenson's childhood was ideal, his youth was the opposite, and "it was partly the pains of youth that afterwards made so vivid to him the pleasures of childhood" (p. 80). The critic is here ignoring the fact that Stevenson's childhood was not ideal: his ill health and odd appearance made other children regard him as an outsider, and he felt lonely. Chesterton regards Stevenson, the man, as a pagan, who looked back objectively on Puritanism with nostalgia and even affection, a sure sign that the old creed had its teeth drawn, at least for him.

Chesterton declares that Treasure Island "was essentially a historical event" (p. 90), because it was the production of a man who was revolting against the mood of his age. The mood emphasized the pointlessness of existence, decadence, and hedonist despair. Chesterton was aware, of course, that Stevenson's youth came before the high point of decadence in the nineties, but our critic sees Stevenson answering the decadents some twenty years before they existed, just as in St. Thomas Aquinas, he sees the great scholastic answering Luther three hundred years ahead of time. Chesterton certainly lived by his own precept: that one cannot

appreciate history unless one has a taste for anachronism. Stevenson's answer to the decadents is based on the morality of a little boy with a toy pistol. When surrounded by blasé art students in Paris, Stevenson painted "mariners a bright prussian blue out of a shilling paint-box and . . .blood in streams of unmistakable crimson lake" (pp. 94-95). In the chapter on Dickens, I have suggested that Chesterton made Dickens and Stevenson more optimistic than they really were. It is particularly clear in the case of Stevenson why the critic did this: he was contrasting a bright figure with a dark background. One's first reaction to Chesterton's book on Stevenson is to consider it too cheerfully Chestertonian, but Stevenson was Chestertonian in comparison to Gissing, Wilde, or the young H. G. Wells. Seventy years after the 1890's, however, Chesterton's summary of Stevenson's early philosophy as "Yo ho ho" (p. 111) appears comically inadequate.

After arguing that Stevenson was an optimist, Chesterton analyses the influence of his Scottish Presbyterian background. When the Scots lose their religion the early training remains: "by being theological they had at least learnt to be logical" (p. 127). In The Ball and the Cross Chesterton depicts two logical Scotsmen: Evan MacIan the Catholic, and Turnbull the Atheist, and makes them argue happily for four hundred pages. Likewise, Stevenson had a logical mind, and it affected his style, which was "in the tradition of scriptures cut with steel into stone" (p. 128).

Chesterton selects one fault in Stevenson, and emphasizes it: the Nietzschean admiration of strength. This can be felt particularly in The Master of Ballantrae and Weir of Hermiston.

> This secret idolatry of what a feminine sentiment calls "strength," this was the only lesion in Stevenson's perfect sanity, the only running sore in the normal health of his soul; and even that had come from too violent an effort to be healthy. So he might, poor fellow, have started a haemorrhage by moving too vigorously on his pillow. (p. 134)

This passage illustrates the essential kindness of Chesterton, a quality that made him so well liked by his contemporaries, even his enemies; he found a fault and immediately excused it, or at least explained it.

After telling his readers that he is incompetent for the task of criticising Stevenson's style, Chesterton sets out to defend that style against critics such as Arnold Bennett and E. F. Benson. The critics had considered Stevenson affected; Chesterton says he is effective. Stevenson found the right word, so his critics call him artificial; he was a story-teller, so his critics call him a liar; he went straight for what was significant, so his critics call him shallow. The thing that strikes Chesterton most,

> . . .is still this sense of somebody being pinked with a rapier in a particular button; of a sort of fastidiousness that has still something of the fighting spirit; that aims at a mark and makes a point, and is certainly not merely an idle trifling with words for the sake of their external elegance or intrinsic melody. (pp. 154-155)

The defect of style that Chesterton finds the most real is the opposite of superficiality and superfluous embroidery. Stevenson's style was bare; he cut the flesh from the bones, and therefore "he lost some of the comfortable complexity of real life" (p. 186). Dickens, Thackeray, and Trollope wrote padded, comfortable, hospitable books; Stevenson, on the other hand, only told us what was necessary. A reader knows the vital facts about a character, but does not feel at home with him in the way one does with Mr. Pickwick or Pendennis. Stevenson "is so very thrifty that

his characters are almost thin" (p. 193). The people of Stevenson are thin and flat:

> When all is said and done, the splendid and inspiring figure of Three-Fingered Jack is a figure and not a statue. You cannot walk round him; and if he has no more than three fingers, he has much less than three dimensions. (p. 195)

The wanderings of the Master at the end of The Master of Ballantrae are criticised: they have "almost the suggestion of the Prince of Wales on an imperial tour" (p. 165). Chesterton was a little Englander, and to call anything imperial was to be derogatory. He says that Stevenson "swept away a good many imperial or international illusions, probably without knowing it; when he said of those regions [the South Seas], 'It is a large ocean but a narrow world'" (p. 174).

Chesterton notices that the legends of the classical world referred back to a golden age; likewise modern Utopias look forward to an age of simplicity; Wordsworth and Stevenson both looked back to the simplicity of childhood. Chesterton believes that this widespread acknowledgement of primordial innocence bears witness to the doctrine of original sin:

> We say lightly enough of a good man that he is a Christian without knowing it. But Stevenson was a Christian theologian without knowing it. Nothing, as I say, would have surprised him or his generation more than to discover it; and it may be that some even of a younger generation are so traditional as to have missed the gradual unfolding of the truth. He would have been the first to say that such dogmas were dead and that we cannot put back the clock to the fifth century. Yet he did not explain why he was so often trying to put back his own clock to his fifth year. For the truth is that there really is no sense or meaning, in this continuous tribute of the poets to the poetry of early childhood, unless it be, as Traherne says, that the world of sin comes between us and something more beautiful, or as Wordsworth says that we came first from God who is our home. (pp. 244-245)

If one had to make a brief summary of what Chesterton thought of Stevenson, one could say that the critic enjoyed the writer because he

was so alive, but there is no need to make such a summary because Chesterton has made one himself in Eugenics and Other Evils. Chesterton takes issue with the Eugenist who wishes to breed healthy people by selecting healthy parents:

> What is the good of telling people that if they marry for love, they may be punished by being the parents of Keats or the parents of Stevenson? Keats died young; but he had more pleasure in a minute than a Eugenist gets in a month. Stevenson had lung-trouble; and it may, for all I know, have been perceptible to the Eugenic eye even a generation before. But who would perform that illegal operation: the stopping of Stevenson? Intercepting a letter bursting with good news, confiscating a hamper full of presents and prizes, pouring torrents of intoxicating wine into the sea, all this is a faint approximation for the Eugenic inaction of the ancestors of Stevenson. This, however, is not the essential point; with Stevenson it is not merely a case of the pleasure we get, but of the pleasure he got. If he had died without writing a line, he would have had more red-hot joy than is given to most men. Shall I say of him, to whom I owe so much, let the day perish wherein he was born? Shall I pray that the stars of the twilight thereof be dark and it be not numbered among the days of the year, because it shut not up the doors of his mother's womb? I respectfully decline; like Job, I will put my hand upon my mouth.[3]

FOOTNOTES -- CHAPTER V

[1]Robert Louis Stevenson, p. 48.

[2]J. C. Furnas, Voyage to Windward: The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson (New York, 1951), p. 14.

[3]Eugenics and Other Evils (London, 1922), p. 45.

# CHAPTER VI

## THE VICTORIAN AGE IN LITERATURE

It has been said that Chesterton had a great sympathy for the Victorian Age, more sympathy, even, than some Victorians.

> The "golden-haired lad of the Swinburnes" (as in his boyhood he was described by Dickens) was thirty-three years old when Dickens died. G. K. Chesterton was not born until 1874. Yet of the two, it is Chesterton rather than Swinburne who seems to be Dickens' contemporary. Whatever Chesterton's faults as a critic of the Victorians, he had an admirable flair for treating the age as if it were alive.[1]

Chesterton was, of course, born a Victorian himself, but he was not proud to progress into the twentieth century like so many of his contemporaries. He did not see the Victorian Age as an advance in all things bright and beautiful, but rather as an advance in some things, and as a serious falling back in others. So Chesterton begins his study with Cobbett, whose death spelt the end of "the sort of democracy that was a return to Nature," the end of the best type of Radicalism, and the end of the best type of Toryism.

In the place of Cobbett, Chesterton sees Macaulay as the great literary figure of the young queen's reign. Macaulay was typical of the Whig aristocracy that recruited new members from the middle classes during the nineteenth century. Chesterton divides Macaulay into two parts: the small philosopher, and the great unconscious historian. Chesterton says that Macaulay's philosophy consists of, "only two thoughts; and neither of them is true."[2] The first "thought" was that politics must go on improving, and the second, the utilitarian theory of toleration. The

Victorian Age in Literature was written in 1913, after Belloc had published The Servile State, and at the time of the Marconi affair. At this time then, Chesterton was convinced that politics were not becoming cleaner, more liberal, and more democratic. Toleration can only work, thought Chesterton, when everyone is more or less agreed on fundamentals; this was the case in Victorian England, but toleration can hardly work under other circumstances. The present quandary of the British government in the face of the National Socialist Party shows the difficulties of operating a policy of toleration under all conditions. One may tolerate a Nazi while one holds power, but what will the Nazi do if allowed to usurp control?

In contrast to his attitude towards Macaulay's philosophy, Chesterton is enthusiastic about the style of Macaulay's history. The roll of great names in Macaulay's books delights the poet who wrote The Ballad of the White Horse and Lepanto. Although Chesterton disagrees with the Whig interpretation of history, he loves the human way in which Macaulay presents it.

Chesterton makes Utilitarian rationalism and Benthamite economics the central philosophy of the Victorian Age: "the soul of Bentham (if he had one) went marching on" (p. 24). Against this central philosophy there were three reactions: the Oxford Movement, the manly sentimentalism of Dickens, and the romantic Protestantism of Carlyle, Ruskin, Kingsley, and Maurice. We have already heard what Chesterton had to say about Dickens. Newman and the Oxford Movement he sees as a sign of man's need for dogma. Carlyle is admired for his love of the poor, and his castigation of the evils of industrial capitalism, but this Scotsman's

admiration of strength is considered a "real weakness;" this may be compared with Chesterton's dislike of Stevenson's Nietzschean bent. Ruskin is described as having a splitting headache: one half of his brain admired Catholic art, the other half detested Catholicism. Chesterton sees this dichotomy affecting Kingsley and the muscular Christians, and even causing some of Tennyson's trouble.

Matthew Arnold is included in the group who attacked the soul of Bentham. The banner he fought under was that of culture. Chesterton says that Arnold's great strength was that he knew certain things that the rest of England did not know: he knew that England was a part of Europe; he knew that England was an oligarchy; he knew that "a rational minimum of culture and common courtesy could exist and did exist throughout large democracies" (p. 47); he knew that the Catholic Church was not a sect; he knew that great landlords were not essential; he knew that small proprietors could prosper. In all this, the reader can see Chesterton's own opinions influencing his criticism of Arnold. Thus, too, Chesterton points out that Arnold was wrong about religion; he thought that one should remain in the established church no matter what one believed. Chesterton commends Arnold's laborious lucidity of style, even though the repetitious qualities sometimes bore. Arnold never lost his temper: "But kept a smile of heart-broken forbearance, as of the teacher in an idiot school, that was enormously insulting" (pp. 49-50).

The second chapter of The Victorian Age in Literature is devoted to novelists. Chesterton was an anti-suffragette, but he starts this chapter by giving equality, and perhaps superiority, to women novelists. He thinks that books like Cranford "might have made domesticity a

fairyland" (p. 59), but the women novelists were side-tracked into becoming mannish and asking for a vote. Chesterton thought that it was the role of woman to deal with the idiosyncracies of human nature, to cope with the exceptions. Men were to be left with the generalizations, the rules. The novel is an art form that concerns itself with particular men in particular circumstances, and therefore women are naturally good novelists. Chesterton suggests that it may have been the influence of the ladies that caused the prudery and circumlocutions of Victorian novels. When Chesterton comes to particular women novelists, he chooses George Eliot and Charlotte Brontë as the greatest Victorians, but compares them invidiously with their predecessor Jane Austen. He considered them to have a narrow outlook, because they had a broad religion; while although Jane Austen lived in a restricted world, "She knew what she knew, like a sound dogmatist: she did not know what she did not know -- like a sound agnostic." Jane Austen "could keep her head, while all the after women went about looking for their brains" (p. 66). Here we can see Chesterton's opinions affecting his criticism; he did not like intellectual women pushing into male society. His own wife, Frances, was the home-loving type, who took him away from the bars of Fleet Street. Mrs. Cecil Chesterton, a working journalist, an "emancipated" woman, and, relatively speaking, a mannish type, did not like the restrictions imposed by Frances on Gilbert. Maisie Ward, on the other hand, considers that the influence of Frances was beneficial. My personal opinion is that, whether the influence of his wife on his thought was good or bad, she kept her husband alive for twenty years longer than he would have lived as a single man. Whatever the source of Chesterton's prejudices about

women, they served him well in his comparison of Jane Austen and George Eliot.

The Victorians were continually arguing about the relative greatness of Dickens and Thackeray. When Chesterton resumes this discussion, he says that Dickens' characters are unique, they only exist in the novels, but we believe in them because their creator makes them so real that they almost walk out of the book; Thackeray's characters, on the other hand, were types, types that still exist. We may meet Major Pendennis any day. Chesterton considers that Thackeray, like Lady Kew or Sir Brian Newcombe, was of le monde; while Dickens knew that that particular world was rapidly coming to an end.

Anthony Trollope and Wilkie Collins are seen as a lesser Thackeray and a lesser Dickens. Trollope was a strict realist, while Collins dealt in the supernatural. Chesterton notices that the Victorians were the most dogmatically materialistic people who ever lived, far more so than the people of the twentieth century; when they did deal with the supernatural, they dealt with the evil side of it: "They might have ghost stories, but not saints' stories" (p. 81).

It is interesting to see how Chesterton deals with Charles Kingsley. Obviously he will not like the man's religious views, nor his side of the quarrel that gave rise to Newman's Apologia Pro Vita Sua, but the admirer of Treasure Island will want to say something pleasant about the author of Westward Ho! This is what he says:

> Kingsley's best books may be called boys' books. There is a real though a juvenile poetry in Westward Ho!, and though that narrative, historically considered, is very much of a lie, it is a good, thundering honest lie. There are also genuinely eloquent things in Hypatia, and a certain electric atmosphere of sectarian excitement

> that Kingsley kept himself in, and did know how to convey. He said he wrote the book in his heart's blood. This is an exaggeration, but there is a truth in it; and one does feel that he may have relieved his feelings by writing it in red ink. (pp. 83-84)

This passage is a good example of how Chesterton deals with an author whose ideas he does not like. The critic says he can write poetry, juvenile poetry; then he goes on to call him a liar and a sectarian.

George Meredith and Thomas Hardy were novelists who typified the break-up of the Victorian compromise. They were both free-thinkers, but their works have very different tones. Chesterton considers Meredith to be an unusual modern, because he was able to take Nature naturally. He was an optimistic writer, and therefore Chesterton likes him, especially when compared to pessimistic Hardy: "a sort of village atheist brooding and blaspheming over the village idiot" (p. 88). In 1962 Hardy is more widely read and respected than Meredith, because he anticipated the modern sense of insecurity in an indifferent universe. His "purblind Doomsters", for example, appeal to writers like Irving Layton, W. H. Auden, and C. Day Lewis, living after the Nazi death camps, and under the shadow of nuclear war. Bergen Evans has written that Hardy's universe "is the universe which modern man assumes."[3] Chesterton's lack of sympathy for Hardy is readily accounted for: he was not a modern man, he did not assume that universe.

Chesterton delights in the humour of Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, and Sir William Gilbert. He thinks that Gilbert's humour put a permanent paid to certain lying platitudes; for example, the assumption of national superiority should not have been possible after:

> But in spite of all temptations
> To belong to other nations
> He remains an Englishman----[4]

The twentieth century thinks of the Victorians as solemn, staid, and serious; but Chesterton warns that although you may laugh at your grandfather, he "may still be laughing at you" (p. 95).

By 1913 some critics were saying that Tennyson was not a fine poet; Chesterton was no Tennyson enthusiast, but he knew that the most Victorian of poets was great. Our critic sees Tennyson as a poet who had a superb Virgilian control of language, but this language is almost a defect because, "He could not think up to the height of his own towering style" (p. 101). Chesterton selects line after line of Tennyson to prove that this poet was a master-craftsman. But the long poems are spoiled by priggishness, and give the opposite meaning to what the poet intended. Thus the Idylls of the King should mean that Arthur is the "highest, yet most human too," but Chesterton thinks that as the poem "is actually developed, we have exactly the opposite impression; that poor old Lancelot, with all his faults, was much more of a man than Arthur" (pp. 102-103). So in In Memoriam Tennyson becomes entangled, and puzzles himself about all sorts of nineteenth-century religious and philosophic doubts; Chesterton would have him say simply: "'I've forgotten every feature of the man's face: I know God holds him alive'" (p. 103). Tennyson is not dogmatic enough to suit Chesterton. The laureate's blind English nationalism annoys Chesterton, who compares the following lines on Napoleon:

> He thought to quell the stubborn hearts of oak,
> Madman!----

with Elizabeth Barrett-Browning's:

> And kings crept out again to feel the sun.

Chesterton had analysed Tennyson's approach to Nature and Art in an essay

written in 1902:

> Tennyson loved beauty more in its collected form in art, poetry, and sculpture; like his own "Lady of Shallott", it was his office to look rather at the mirror than at the object. He was an artist, as it were, at two removes: he was a splendid imitator of the splendid imitations.[5]

Although Chesterton admired Tennyson's control of language, the poet was too wooly-minded, too jingoistic, too anti-revolutionary, and too Victorian in the bad sense of the word. "He really did hold a great many of the same views as Queen Victoria, though he was gifted with a more fortunate literary style" (p. 99).

Swinburne's style of poetry has been severely criticised for being too syrupy, too smooth, too languorous, too musical, and too sensuous. Chesterton admits that the worst poetry does have these qualities, and says that "The lilies and languors of virtue/For the raptures and roses of vice" is the worst couplet in the world's literature for both form and sentiment. But Chesterton finds admirable qualities in the style at its best: the short pithy words, the "profane parody of the Old Testament" (p. 113), the rhythm, and rhyme. What Chesterton really objects to in Swinburne is the philosophy: "Glory to Man in the Highest! for Man is the Master of things." This, as far as our critic is concerned, is simply not true. Answers to the Poets is a group of parodies by Chesterton; it includes "Dolores Replies to Swinburne," the second stanza of which reads:

> I am sorry, old dear, if I hurt you,
> No doubt it is all very nice
> With the lilies and languors of virtue
> And the raptures and roses of vice.
> But the notion impels me to anger,
> That vice is all rapture for me,
> And if you think virtue is languor
> Just try it and see.

This may act as a summary of what Chesterton thought of Swinburne's ideas.

Swinburne, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Fitzgerald, all express a mood of pessimism; even their taste for the Middle Ages was sad. William Morris also looked back to the Middle Ages, but "He was the first of the Aesthetes to smell medievalism as a smell of the morning; and not as a mere scent of decay" (p. 122). Chesterton sensed a promise for a return of happier times at the end of the Victorian era; for him, that meant some form of modified mediaevalism.

The last chapter of The Victorian Age in Literature is called "The Break-up of the Compromise;" this compromise was between Christianity and rational, liberal Utilitarianism ("liberal" being used in Newman's sense of the word). Chesterton takes the year 1870, the year Dickens died, the year of the Franco-Prussian War, as the beginning of the end. The English Christian had not the brain to fight the Utilitarians, and the Utilitarians had not the conscience or heart to fight the Christians. Both Christianity and its enemy killed each other, and no one today knows whether England is a Christian country or not. With Christianity and Liberal Utilitarianism dead, the rest of the century was like a quiet house on a summer afternoon: every one would have liked something to happen, but nothing occurred. The aesthetic movement did provide a little interest; but people only make art their main concern when there is very little else to be concerned about. Henry James and Oscar Wilde are the two most notable figures of this interregnum.

The quiet of the end of the century was broken by two movements: Socialism and Imperialism. Chesterton points out that at one time Socialists and Anarchists were more or less equal rivals. The horror of

the industrial system, by the time of William Morris, had divided England into three classes: "Knaves, Fools and Revolutionists" (p. 142). The idea of bureaucratic revolution, desired by the Fabians, defeated the Anarchist's views. The flames of the French Revolution were burning low in 1837; at the end of Victoria's reign "it was Bernard Shaw who trod out the last ember. . ." (p. 144).

The Victorian Age ended with the popularization of Imperialism, which Chesterton sees as an un-Victorian thing. Kipling was a genius who had a sympathy for Indians, and a sympathy for the oppressors of Indians, and " a vague journalistic sympathy with the men that misrepresent everything that has happened to the Indian; but of the Victorian virtues, nothing" (p. 152).

The strength and weakness of Chesterton's criticism of the Victorians is that he took sides. He sees the old battle between material values and spiritual values ended in the deadlock of Victorian compromise; he wanted that deadlock to be broken, but not in the way that it was being broken. It appeared to Chesterton that materialists and socialists were side-stepping the problem of the compromise; they were assuming that the matter was settled; they were assuming that miracles do not happen, that religion was dead as far as thinking men were concerned, and would soon be dead altogether. Chesterton, in opposition to this view, affirmed that religion was alive and waxing. His book on the Victorian Age is based on his understanding of this central concern of the Victorians, and this understanding controls and informs his criticism of the individual writers.

FOOTNOTES -- CHAPTER VI

[1]George H. Ford, Dickens and His Readers (Princeton, 1955), p. 240.

[2]The Victorian Age in Literature, p. 22.

[3]Thomas Hardy, Far From the Madding Crowd (Greenwich, Connecticut, 1960), Introduction, p. x.

[4]"The Genius of Gilbert," The Nation (1908), reprinted A Handful of Authors, ed. Dorothy Collins (London, 1953), p. 129.

[5]"Tennyson," Bookman (1902), reprinted A Handful of Authors, p. 97.

# CHAPTER VII

## WILLIAM COBBETT

The most important part of Chesterton's literary criticism is concerned with the Victorians. The reason for this is that he believed the Victorian Age became aware of certain problems, which remain for the twentieth century to solve. I shall deal with Cobbett now, because Chesterton thought of the great pre-Victorian as the man who had found the solution to these problems before other people were conscious of them, and as a man who formed a connecting link with mediaeval England. William Cobbett is concerned more with the political, social, agricultural, and historical ideas of its subject, than with literature.

But the style of Cobbett's prose is not ignored. Chesterton regrets that the pithy English of Cobbett's abuse has fallen into desuetude, especially as there seems to be so much scope for its use in the twentieth century.[1] Whether one agrees with Cobbett's ideas or not, it should still be possible to enjoy his language:

> The beauty of his incessant abuse is a matter of art for art's sake. The pleasure which an educated taste would receive in hearing Cobbett call a duchess an old cat or a bishop a dirty dog is almost onomatopoeic, in its love of a melody all but detached from meaning.[2]

The true greatness of Cobbett was his vision of the future; he saw more clearly than any of his contemporaries the weaknesses of England's economic system. The Victorians, in their prosperity (for the few), might consider his predictions of bankruptcy for the country proved false; the English of the twentieth century must consider his predictions only too

true. The continuous preaching by twentieth century politicians has all had the same tone: England must export or die. Cobbett saw that an independent, self-supporting peasantry could have prevented Britain's dependence on imported food. Chesterton is mainly interested in Cobbett as a teacher for modern men. William Cobbett was written in 1927, when the Distributist League was very active; Cobbett's writings could have been a blue-print for Distributists. The attitude of Chesterton to Cobbett may be contrasted with that of Edward Thomas, who wrote:

> Cobbett is such a man and such a writer that names and phrases once full of dire and immediate significance have now something of the value of names in Ossian or the Prophetic Books of the Bible.[3]

Thomas thought of Cobbett as a model of prose, who had antiquated ideas, and who was concerned in many forgotten controversies; Chesterton thought of Cobbett as a model of prose, who had very modern ideas, and who was concerned in an up to the minute controversy.

Cobbett detested the cheerful lies of Whig history. He knew that the Protestant Reformation in England had provided an opportunity for the rich to seize the land. The enclosure movement continued the process started in the sixteenth century. By the beginning of the nineteenth century the disinherited peasantry had become wage slaves, and the employers had reduced the wages; by 1823 an agricultural labourer was earning half as much as a common soldier, without all the soldier's perquisites, and was eating less than a prisoner in jail. Although Cobbett was concerned about the physical condition of the poor, Chesterton realises that this was not his primary concern. Our critic points out that a slave-owner might be concerned about the physical needs of his slaves, or a horse-owner or a sheep-owner might be concerned about the

physical needs of his animals. But Cobbett did not merely think of the bodily needs of poor men, "He was very much concerned for their dignity, their good name, their honour, and even their glory" (p. 45).

Cobbett was always a respectable man, who valued thrift, decency, and honesty; yet he was thrown into prison. "He was respectable and he might easily have been respected. It is his great virtue that he preferred to be reviled" (p. 52). Chesterton sees him as a patriot, whose tragedy was that he retained his patriotism. As an exile in America, Cobbett had remembered the England of his childhood with nostalgia. Most Americans were reviling England, and Cobbett was annoyed. Writing under the psuedonym of Peter Porcupine, he defended England's honour. When he eventually returned to his native land, the leading politicians of the Tory Party engaged his services as a pamphleteer. Then he started to look at the true condidtions of England.

The Tory saw that the old English way of life was being undermined by new industrial commercialism. He went to Pitt and the other party leaders and explained the evil as he saw it. The officials of the party met his wild denunciation of commercialism with polite smiles. The next stage of Cobbett's life came when he denounced the flogging of an English soldier by a German mercenary, and was promptly thrown into prison by a packed jury. Then he could no longer be a Tory, and so he became a Radical. Chesterton considers that this change from one political group to another must not be used as a summary of what really happened. As Chesterton sees it, Cobbett remained the same, but discovered that the Tories did not wish to uphold the things he loved. Cobbett's objection to a German flogging an Englishman appeals particularly to Chesterton,

who hated Prussianism.

Chesterton compares Cobbett in prison with French and Irish patriots: Cobbett was not clear why he was being punished, when, as far as he could see, his only crime was patriotism; Cobbett suffered for an instinct; the French and Irish patriots, says Chesterton, suffered for an idea. But imprisonment turned "an impulse into an idea" (p. 98). Chesterton seems almost pleased that Cobbett was sent to prison, because to imprison such a man was a grave blunder on the part of the ruling caste.

> It was suicidally silly to act with such injustice to a man with such a talent for expounding justice, including intellectual justice. It would have been wiser in the governing class to have gone on their natural course and continued to harry the imbecile and to torment the dumb. Thousands of poor men have been and are persecuted quite as unjustly as Cobbett by the police and the plutocracy of modern states; but a certain political instinct and practical intuition have generally and wisely guided the authorities to hit the sort of man who cannot possibly hit them back. It is impossible not to comment on the very curious carelessness, which in this case allowed the rich and the rulers to commit the customary cruelties upon a man eminently capable of telling the tale. They threw him into gaol for nothing, or for anything, or for something more or less meritorious, for all the world as if he had been his own grandfather the agricultural labourer.
>
> Certainly if they put him in prison, they ought never to have let him out. (pp. 99-100)

By letting Cobbett out, the authorities let loose a man who was to remain angry for the next thirty years. Prison had turned the finest anti-Jacobin of the age into something approaching a Jacobin.

Cobbett had been in favour of a vigorous prosecution of the French War, but when he left prison he wanted peace. "He would waste no more time on saving England from France. He had the huge task of saving England from the English" (p. 107). Chesterton considers that if ever

there was a time, and if ever there was a man, for an English revolution, the time was after Waterloo, and the man was Cobbett.

The incident of Cobbett bringing the bones of Tom Paine from America to England has been ridiculed. Chesterton declares that such a symbolic gesture, such a public apology, would have been understood and admired in any other era. Only the commercially-minded materialists of the nineteenth century would ridicule such an act. Cobbett, the writer of plain prose, was behaving like a poet.

Chesterton spends some time in describing Cobbett's power of vision, which "could place anything from the face of a stranger to the strength of a horse; from the shade of ripeness in a cornfield to the shade of rottenness in a Cabinet Minister" (p. 147). With his clear sight, Cobbett sees through official English History: the sort of history that depicts the Middle Ages as an age of barbarians, and everything that has happened since the Renaissance as a gradual improvement. Chesterton points out that when one walks across England what one sees are villages of tumbledown cottages clustered around a church, a church that, considering the time it was built, and considering the other buildings in the village, is as startling as the Eiffel Tower. Cobbett lived in the Romantic Era, the age of "Gothic Madness," when so many artists "traced the graceful proportions of Gothic buildings. . .," but the Rural Rider saw

> . . .not the graceful proportions but rather the disgraceful disproportions. He saw a colossal contrast; the contrast between a village that was hardly a hamlet and a village church that was almost a cathedral. (p. 158)

The other great building of the English countryside is the squire's house, and Chesterton points out that this house is not usually mediaeval at all,

in spite of the impression given by the cheap novelettes; most English country houses are neo-classical. There are some mediaeval stately homes; however, they are often called abbeys! Because Cobbett was self-educated he used his eyes and believed them; if his eyes contradicted what he read in history books, he still believed his eyes. Cobbett's History of the Reformation was written in a rage. His reaction to what had happened in England in the sixteenth century

> . . .was a towering passion; and whether that or a more patient exposition be appropriate to controversy, there is no doubt about which is appropriate to Cobbett. He would have said that when he found a man robbing his hen-roost he called out 'Stop, thief!' and not 'Stop, philosophical communist, invading the thesis of private property!' (p. 172)

Chesterton, of course, sees Cobbett as the avenger of the murder of a happier England. Cobbett's book was criticised and aroused controversy, not because there can be any controversy about the facts (although Cobbett's history, like all history, makes mistakes. Later Cobbett's mistakes were traced and documented by Cardinal Gasquet), but because the book was so controversial. Later historians may write in a milder tone concerning the facts that Cobbett screamed about, but these facts will never be hidden again. As far as Chesterton is concerned, Cobbett

> . . .was simply a man who had discovered a crime: ancient like many crimes; concealed like all crimes. He was as one who had found in a dark wood the bones of his mother, and suddenly knew she had been murdered. He knew now that England had been secretly slain. Some, he would say, might think it a matter of mild regret to be expressed in murmurs. But when he found a corpse he gave a shout. . .. (p. 176)

Chesterton had learned most of his history from Belloc, who was not the most impartial historian, and Chesterton revels in Cobbett's version of history, because Cobbett, like Belloc, "made war on the same Whiggish

wealth and secrecy and in defence of the same human dignity and domesticity."[4]

Chesterton feels a need to point out that Cobbett had a sense of humour. When Cobbett suggests that a Methodist preacher and a pair of stocks, together on the same village green, should be brought together into one harmonious whole, the humour of the writer should not be hidden by any bitterness. Cobbett layed about him with a cudgel, but Chesterton observes that this is a good English weapon made of wood, and that the heads of the lords and judges which Cobbett belaboured were also wooden. Chesterton notices that in spite of the tremendous activity, and continual controversy, of Cobbett's life, there is a calm at the centre.

Cobbett had another softer side: he was a man who loved the mob, even if he did bully and hector it. He was a patient father and teacher, "one of the greatest schoolmasters in the world" (p. 203). Indeed, he combined the qualities of the good teacher and the angry sociologist. He made abstract ideas concrete:

> If he had merely undertaken to set out the multiplication table it would have run: 'Twice one useless regiment is two useless regiments; twice two venal Ministers is four venal Ministers; twice three pluralistic parsonages is six pluralistic parsonages like those possessed by the Reverend Mr. Hugg of Netherwallop,' and so on. (p. 198)

Cobbett has often been called the typical Englishman, but Chesterton finds in him one quality that is unEnglish: the love of being provocative. Cobbett never would let sleeping dogs lie; therefore it is not surprising that he had a pack of hounds yapping at his heels, and this presented him with "a further opportunity for turning on them and telling them they were curs and mongrels, not to mention mad dogs" (p. 224). This provocative quality in Cobbett almost saved England from the horrors

of industrial capitalism.

Chesterton thinks that Cobbett had the qualities of a mystic and a poet, though it would have infuriated him to be called either. He thought himself as much of a rationalist as Tom Paine, and Chesterton admits that usually the style of his writing is as clear as broad daylight. But the way in which Cobbett called Old Sarum the "Accursed Hill," "has in it something of the palpable apocalypse" (p. 229), compared with the terms used by pamphleteers and politicians. Chesterton goes on to describe the incident of the Rural Rider's seeing the shape of a crucifix in the grounds of one of the new landowners, and how he spurred his horse to an unaccustomed gallop to escape from that shape. Cobbett himself does not emphasize the emotional side of this incident; but Chesterton sees it as the instinctive knowledge of a mystic, who saw the cross not as a Christian symbol, but as an instrument of torture. Cobbett foresaw what Chesterton saw, the poor people of England being crucified.

The second trial of Cobbett in 1831 was his finest hour. Chesterton thought it foolish of the authorities to prosecute Cobbett in 1810, but considers it was madness to do the same thing twenty-one years later. It gave Cobbett a platform on which he could stand and tell the judges and the world why he was hated. He was hated because he defended the defenceless, the poor. After Cobbett had become a Member of Parliament; after he had seen the Reform Act passed in such a way as to betray his hopes; after he had seen the freeing of Negro slaves in the British Empire, and the creation of English slaves under the New Poor Law; after he had seen the aristocracy and the middle class form an alliance to forget the poor; after he had commented in his own bitter blustering style on all these things ". . .then he made the only comment

at all commensurate with it, or equal in eloquence to the occasion: he died" (p. 266).

In William Cobbett Chesterton ignores the puritanical side of his subject. The author chooses not to mention that Cobbett never drank alcohol during all his years in the army, and that on one of his rides he lived on nuts, home-made bread, and milk. If Chesterton had mentioned these things he would have had to reconcile Cobbett, the potential saviour of merry England, with his own version of "The Englishman":

> St. George he was for England,
> And before he killed the dragon
> He drank a pint of English ale
> Out of an English flagon.
> For though he fast right readily
> In hair-shirt or in mail,
> It isn't safe to give him cakes
> Unless you give him ale.
>
> St. George he was for England,
> And right gallantly set free
> The lady left for dragon's meat
> And tied up to a tree;
> But since he stood for England
> And knew what England means,
> Unless you give him bacon
> You musn't give him beans.
>
> St. George he is for England,
> And shall wear the shield he wore
> When we go out in armour
> With the battle-cross before.
> But though he is jolly company
> And very pleased to dine,
> It isn't safe to give him nuts
> Unless you give him wine.

Chesterton chose to write on Cobbett for three reasons: first, because Cobbett was a prophet who foretold the evils to come; second, because Cobbett's solution for economic and social problems is still applicable in the twentieth century; third, because Cobbett looked backward as well as forward, back to a happier time, back to Chaucer's England.

## FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER VII

[1]George Orwell is one twentieth century writer who uses "pithy English." It is interesting that Orwell owes something to Chesterton's influence; this point is developed in the "Conclusion" of this thesis.

[2]William Cobbett, p. 8.

[3]William Cobbett, Rural Rides (London, 1912), Introduction by Edward Thomas, p. x.

[4]C. C. Mandell and E. Shanks, Hilaire Belloc: The Man and his Work (London, 1916), Introduction by Chesterton, p. xi.

# CHAPTER VIII

## CHAUCER

By 1932, when he wrote Chaucer, Chesterton was convinced that the troubles of the Victorians and of the twentieth century were due to the loss of certain mediaeval ideals: ideals that Cobbett had been aware of, and that Chaucer had almost been unaware of, because in the fourteenth century they were universally accepted. Chesterton regarded mediaeval England as an "incredible fairyland of a free country,"[1] but he did not think that it was free from faults. In describing the guild system he wrote:

> I shall not, of course, be supposed by any sane person to be describing a moral paradise, or to be implying that it was free from the faults and fights and sorrows that harass human life in all times, and certainly not least in our own time.[2]

In the Introduction to Chaucer, the author tells the reader that, although he would like to sit down in the Tabard and enjoy Chaucer without worrying about the background and the philosophy of his times, these matters must be discussed because:

> I was also confronted with the fact, which seems to be quite as certain a fact, that he was much more sane and cheerful and normal than most of the later writers. He was less delirious than Shakespeare, less harsh than Milton, less fanatical than Bunyan, less embittered than Swift. I had in any case to construct some sort of theory in connexion with this practical problem and this practical fact. Therefore in this book I advance a general thesis; that, in spite of everything, there was a balanced philosophy in mediaeval times; and some very unbalanced philosophies in later times. (p. x)

The greatness of Chaucer depends, for Chesterton, on the fact that he holds a philosophy in common with the mass of his contemporaries.

Like Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Shakespeare, Chaucer does not invent a new cosmos; he accepts the common beliefs of the common men of his age, and expresses them in an uncommon way (pp. 260-261). Too many modern thinkers and artists feel bound to be original thinkers; they cannot be content with the thoughts that have satisfied generations of mankind. Chaucer, on the other hand, is only too pleased to acknowledge his indebtedness to "olde bookes" (p. 24). Our critic realises, of course, that what Chaucer read in the books was not necessarily well known to the mass of his contemporaries; the point is that the books were written by men who were not faddists, not "heretics," but by men who were happy to share most of the opinions of the ordinary people of their era.[3] Chesterton based his beliefs on a philosophy of gratitude; he found God by looking for someone to say thank you to, as he tells us in Orthodoxy:

> The test of all happiness is gratitude; and I felt grateful, though I hardly knew to whom. Children are grateful when Santa Claus puts in their stockings gifts of toys or sweets. Could I not be grateful to Santa Claus when he put in my stockings the gift of two miraculous legs? We thank people for birthday presents or cigars and slippers. Can I thank no one for the birthday present of birth? (pp. 53-54)

Naturally Chesterton is pleased to see that Chaucer is also grateful. Besides being in debt to previous writers, and acknowledging what he owes, Chaucer is also original.

> There had never been anything like the lively realism of the ride to Canterbury done or dreamed of in our literature before. He is not only the father of all our poets, but the grandfather of all our hundred million novelists. It is rather a responsibility for him. But anyhow, nothing can be more original than an origin. (p. 24)

There are then, three qualities in Chaucer that make him great: he is thankful, traditional, and original.

Chesterton, the author of detective stories, delights in the

pastime of building up a case from fragmentary clues, of seizing on anything a character may say and using it as evidence against him; but he refuses to do this sort of thing with the fragmentary facts and sayings of Chaucer. He considers that the scholars who build a story out of two or three tiny pieces of evidence are wasting their talents. Chesterton finds the type of scholar who tries to decide on the facts of Chaucer's love life from a few lines of poetry particularly obnoxious, and writes:

> I therefore delicately deprecate the idea of biographers thus appearing as detectives; especially as that not very superior sort of detective employed to collect evidence for a divorce between Mr. and Mrs. Chaucer, five hundred years after their death. I do not know whether Mr. and Mrs. Chaucer were happy or unhappy. Apparently it has not occurred to our bright psychologists that they were probably both. There seems to be a certain lack of vividness in envisaging what marriage is like, as well as what poetry is like. But, as Professor Pollard has justly said, what evidence there is rather points to Chaucer having been happier and more religious and respectable while his wife was alive than afterwards. It is more to the point that he was apparently poorer afterwards. Which may be rather a compliment to the wife. (p. 91)

Having explained that he will not attempt to deal with the doubtful parts of Chaucer's life, our critic points out that there are four matters that are certain and important: Chaucer was English, he was Catholic, he was chivalric, and he was bourgeois. In the Middle Ages there was a common culture throughout Europe, and Chaucer shared this culture; but there is a certain kindliness, humour, and charity in Chaucer that Chesterton finds particularly English. Whether Chesterton, an Englishman, is correct in distinguishing these qualities as English characteristics need not concern us here. Chesterton insists that Chaucer was an orthodox Catholic; that he criticised abuses in the Church, and drew satirical portraits of churchmen, does not mean that he was himself any the less a Catholic. The obvious enjoyment which the author of The

Persones Tale gets from setting out theology, very orthodox theology, is but one indication that Chaucer was no heretic. Chesterton admired the idea behind chivalry: the strong defending the weak. The chivalry of the fourteenth century had divagated from that ideal; but if the armigerous contemporaries of Chaucer were not as brave and strong as they should have been, if they were too interested in coats of arms and not sufficiently interested in arms, if the particularly English vice of snobbery was causing some decline in chivalry, it was a glorious autumnal decline, full of splendour and colour. When, therefore, Chesterton calls Chaucer bourgeois, there is no insult implied. The middle classes of the Middle Ages were closely connected with realities; Chaucer and his father dealt with wine, not with wine lists. Chesterton sees the bourgeoisie of the Middle Ages as a product of the guilds; so the poor apprentice might eventually become a prosperous merchant, and his wife might eventually be "y-clept 'ma dame.'" What Chesterton has to say about these four aspects of Chaucer, is clearly influenced by his own mind and ideas.

The influence of Chesterton's opinions is again apparent when he suggests that the difference between Mediaeval society and Modern society is that the former was ordered and the latter is disordered: "up to a certain time life was conceived as a Dance, and after that time life was conceived as a Race" (Chaucer p. 145). Here Chesterton is indirectly preaching that we should adopt an order, and reject the present mad momentum of society.

Chesterton compares Chaucer's era with the Renaissance, and suggests that the former had a more balanced outlook and philosophy. Shakespeare's contemporaries indulged their fancies at the cost of everything else,

but Chaucer was a prudent man. The seven deadly sins did balance their contrary virtues. Chaucer was soaked with the communis sententia of the Middle Ages:

> The point is worthy of note, because it is one of the points in which his greatness has been unfairly over-shadowed by the greatness of Shakespeare. When all is said, there was in the greatest of the sixteenth-century men of genius a slight slip or failure upon the point of common sense. That is what Voltaire meant when he called Shakespeare an inspired barbarian; and there is something to be said for Voltaire as well as for Shakespeare. Let it be agreed, on the one hand, that the Renaissance poets had in one sense obtained a wider as well as a wilder range. But though they juggled with worlds, they had less real sense of how to balance the world. . .. When all is said, there is something a little sinister in the number of mad people there are in Shakespeare. We say that he uses his fools to brighten the dark background of tragedy; I think he sometimes uses them to darken it. Somewhere on that highest of all human towers there is a tile loose. There is something that rattles rather crazily in the high wind of the highest of mortal tragedies. What is felt faintly even in Shakespeare is felt far more intensely in the other Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists; they go in for dancing ballets of lunatics and choruses of idiots, until sanity is the exception rather than the rule. In some ways Chaucer's age was even harsher than Shakespeare's; but even its ferocity was rational. Chaucer describes a whole crowd of many-coloured personalities of all possible types and tendencies. But I do not remember that, in the whole five volumes of Chaucer, there is such a thing as a madman. (pp. 221-222)

Chesterton considers that although the Renaissance accomplished many brilliant things, the loss of Mediaeval order was a very real loss.

In The Canterbury Tales each tale fits the teller, particularly the Rhyme of Sir Topas:

> . . .the poet's own story is the only unpoetical story. The tales are always appropriate; and the inappropriate is the most appropriate of all. Chaucer has distributed caps to fit the heads of the whole company; and when he reserves the dunce's cap for himself, it is all the more fitting because it does not fit. (p. 157)

The Canterbury Tales may be considered as the original novel of character: for the characters exist not merely to tell the tale, but for their own sake; and the tales exist not merely for their own sake, but to tell us

something of the teller. Chesterton notices that the frame of the stories is better than the stories themselves; the details related in the Prologue are used later. Thus we are told that the squire was serviceable and carved before his father at table; this detail is used after the Squire's Tale, when the Franklin praises the young man, and,

> He informs the youth (if we may so translate him) that he is a credit to his family and upbringing; that he has performed his duties in an eminently satisfactory manner, and generally that he is almost a model to his generation. Then the thought behind all this begins to shape itself, and the old gentleman introduces the lamentable subject of his own son, who is (it would seem) a most prodigal and unprofitable social character; quite unlikely to go out of his way to entertain the company by telling, or even leaving half-told, the story of Cambuscan bold. The rest of the old squire's speech consists entirely of regrets and gloomy prophecies about his own absent and unpresentable offspring. Now that is a living incident that leaps at the eye; a story that comes straight out of the things that really happen. It is as quiet and as real as Jane Austen. (p. 161).

Chaucer deserves enormous credit for being the first person to give the world the fine shades of fictitious character.

In the chapter of Chaucer devoted to religion, Chesterton takes issue with the critics who try to make Chaucer into a Lollard. Chaucer criticises the same abuses within the Church that the Lollards objected to, but that does not make him a Lollard. Chesterton and the socialists opposed many of the same features of capitalism, but that does not make Chesterton a socialist. Chesterton also objects to modern writers who call Chaucer "the morning-star of the Reformation." Chaucer was a man whose whole outlook was based on Catholic philosophy and theology. Any writer who sees incipient Protestantism in the fact that Chaucer preferred the poor parson to the monk or the friar, can hardly have read to the end of The Canterbury Tales, for the Parson's Tale is nothing more or

less than a very Catholic sermon, that might well bear an Imprimatur in the twentieth century. Chaucer and Catholicism share a certain cosmic complexity that is distinct from the simplifications of Protestantism. The Protestant sees all sin as one: he sees the sinner as damned, and the repentant sinner as saved, completely saved; the Catholic sees all sorts of sins: venial, mortal, actual, original, and very unoriginal sins; he does not damn all sinners: Purgatory, Limbo, penances, and indulgences are all alternatives to Hell; and the repentant Catholic sinner is only certain of Heaven on the exciting and human condition that he keeps free from mortal sin. The Catholic's spiritual life is more complicated than the Protestant's.

> Geoffrey Chaucer was exactly what 'the gentle Pardoner' was not -- he was a gentle Pardoner. But we shall misunderstand all the men of that curious and rather complex society, if we do not realise that in a sense their eccentricities were connected with the same centre. The official venality of the bad Pardoner, and the very unofficial amiability of the good Pardoner, both came from the peculiar temptations and difficult diplomacies of the same religious system. (pp. 257-258)

The chapter on the religion of Chaucer is an excellent example of Chesterton's own philosophy informing his criticism; because the critic and his subject shared the same religion and philosophy, Chesterton is able to understand and appreciate the tone of Chaucer in a way that more scholarly critics (for example G. G. Coulton) can never do.

The final chapter of Chaucer is called "The Moral of the Story." In this chapter Chesterton neglects Chaucer to a large extent, in order to write about the "central" philosophy that was the basis of the civilization in which the poet lived. Chesterton has no time for historians who darken the Middle Ages; he takes the cultured, sophisticated, humorous, charming, religious, and worldly character of Chaucer, and insists that

such a personality could not have existed in a benighted barbaric era. The cheerful Chesterton selects the cheerfulness of Chaucer in particular, and asks the cause of it. He finds that it depends on Chaucer's theology, not merely his religion, but his theology. A mystical sense of the beauty of religion alone "would not have kept Chaucer cheerful" (p. 263). It was because Chaucer knew the facts of his religion as facts that he retained his happy sanity.

Our critic sees the Middle Ages as the high point of history. As Percy Van Dyke Shelly has written of Chesterton's Chaucer:

> It is a book that contains some excellent things, but its subject is not Chaucer's poetry or the greatness of Chaucer as an artist, but Chaucer's philosophy, and the philosophy and religion of his age, and the superiority in general of the social order of the fourteenth century to that of the twentieth.[4]

Chesterton considers that in the Middle Ages the social arrangements were basically sound; the religious belief was correct; the philosophy was advanced enough to cope with the complexities of the cosmos. The literature of the Ancients was respected, and was becoming increasingly well known; and Dante and Chaucer show that the Middle Ages could produce new literature of the highest order. Why then did this culture collapse in the sixteenth century? Chesterton thinks that the main reason for the collapse was that mediaeval men were incapable of achieving their potential, because of technological limitations. For example, Chaucer's education was haphazard; although he was comparatively rich, he lacked the amenities for learning that we take for granted. The number of books a mediaeval man possessed might be small, but they were likely to be great; if he only had three books, they might be copies of Aristotle, Dante, and St. Thomas, and that meant he owned three worlds. Yet the

physical limitations of the Middle Ages meant that the possibilities remained only possibilities, and were never realised. Chesterton was a revolutionary, who would have us return to these possibilities, and with our modern advantages, realise them. It is clear then, that Chesterton's book on Chaucer is filled with his concern for the twentieth century.

FOOTNOTES -- CHAPTER VIII

[1]G. K. Chesterton, A Short History of England (London, 1917), p. 99.

[2]Ibid., p. 101.

[3]Chaucer, pp. 21-25, 191-193, 272-277, passim.

[4]Percy Van Dyke Shelly, The Living Chaucer (Philadelphia, 1940), p. 20.

## CHAPTER IX

## GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

Both Bernard Shaw and Chesterton were aware that nineteenth century capitalism had raised certain problems. Neither of these men was satisfied with ad hoc solutions to particular immediate problems; they both desired a complete reorganization of society. Chesterton looked back to the writings of Cobbett and to the age of Chaucer for a solution for the evils of capitalism, but Shaw looked forward to a new socialist order of society. Although Chesterton disagreed with his friend Shaw, he admired the Irishman's skill in attacking the evils of capitalist England.

Chesterton's book on Shaw is a mixture of admiration for Shaw's attack on the evils of capitalism, and disagreement with Shaw's solution. Chesterton considers Shaw as an Irishman, a Puritan, and a Progressive. It is essential that Chesterton write a chapter on each of these three aspects of Shaw, or the reader might misunderstand their significance. For example, the stage Irishman is a well known type, but he is not what Chesterton is writing about. Rather the real Irishman is almost the opposite of the rowdy, sentimental, "broth of a bhoy" so dear to the English heart. The real Irishman is logical, unsentimental, ascetic, chaste, practical, and pugnacious. Shaw had these qualities, but had them in the blend peculiar to the Protestant minority. Chesterton does not mention the streak of Jansenism to be found in the Catholic Irish, but confines the evils of Puritanism to the Protestants. To admit to the existence of Jansenism in Ireland, would be to spoil the idealised

picture of happy Catholic peasant proprietors.

The English Garrison in Ireland retained many Puritanical qualities that the English in England had lost in 1660. One of these qualities was

> . . .a refusal to contemplate God or Goodness with anything lighter or milder than the most fierce concentration of the intellect. A Puritan meant originally a man whose mind had no holidays. To use his own favourite phrase, he would let no living thing come between him and his God; an attitude which involved eternal torture for him and a cruel contempt for all the living things. It was better to worship in a barn than in a cathedral for the specific and specified reason that the cathedral was beautiful. Physical beauty was a false and sensual symbol coming in between the intellect and the object of its intellectual worship. The human brain ought to be at every instant a consuming fire which burns through all conventional images until they are as transparent as glass.[1]

Shaw had this intellectual quality, and it makes him rigidly responsible; he is never frivolous, never nonsensical (in the sense in which Lewis Carrol and Edmund Lear are nonsensical); "his wit is never a weakness" (p. 36). Chesterton thinks that Shaw retained certain Puritan prejudices, such as a dislike of alcohol and a contempt for frivolity. All his plays might be called "plays for Puritans."

Bernard Shaw grew to manhood at a time when it was fashionable to be progressive, and he became a progressive. Chesterton does not like progressives, but he praises Shaw for his ability to originate new arguments for the causes he supports. Shaw was often an embarrasment to the people on whose side he argued, because he was more rational than they were. For example, many of the supporters of woman's equality were horrified when Shaw suggested that true equality implied that men should be as rude to women as they were to men. Likewise the jingoistic English patriots who favoured the Boer War were astonished to find Shaw supporting the war because he was an anti-patriot, and therefore he had no sympathy for Boer patriotism. One of the reasons then that Shaw's arguments were

so effective was that they were never sentimental. He based his case on masses of facts. Chesterton approves of the rejection of sentiment when dealing with things like the British Empire or modern armies, but considers that Shaw is completely mistaken when he tries to take the sentiment out of marriage or military courage, for these things cannot exist without sentiment. Chesterton's opinions on imperialism are apparent in the fact that he considers that sentiment should be ignored when dealing with the British Empire. A further defect that Chesterton finds in Shaw's lack of sentiment, is his failure to sympathize with the prejudices and appetites of the poor. This was the point on which Chesterton disagreed most strongly with Fabian Socialism. Somewhere Chesterton writes that Mrs. Webb would solve the problems of the state by ordering the citizens around as though they were servants in the kitchen; Chesterton has too much respect for the common man to do that. Shaw, on the other hand, though too good a republican to walk with kings, had lost the common touch.

Whether Shaw was right or wrong to despise romance and sentimentality, he, as a playwright, should at least have understood these things. Chesterton, for example, considers that Shaw's lack of understanding of romance spoils the portrayal of Eugene in Candida, for no young man in love would object to his beloved peeling potatoes or trimming lamps. Our critic thinks that these domestic duties would be raised to the plane of nobility in the eyes of the young lover. "For dramatic purposes, G. B. S., even if he despises romance, ought to comprehend it. But then, if once he comprehended romance, he would not despise it" (p. 122).

Shaw has been called a writer of problem plays, but Chesterton believes that no serious problem of interpretation arises. In fact, a Shavian play tends to be as clear as an evangelical tract, and as one-sided. Chesterton takes the conversation between Undershaft and the professor of Greek in Major Barbara as an example of such an unfair argument. The young professor yields his position far too readily to please our critic, who provides answers for the sophistries of Undershaft.

Shaw has been called paradoxical, but Chesterton says that he is not paradoxical in the usual sense of the word: that is, he does not make apparently or genuinely self-contradictory statements. What has been called paradox in Shaw's writings is really consistency, the carrying of one clear principle further than anyone else has ever carried it. Shaw's only paradox "is to pull out one thread or cord of truth longer and longer into waste and fantastic places. He does not allow for that deeper sort of paradox by which two opposite cords of truth become entangled in an inextricable knot" (p. 176).

Shaw has been called a writer of Socialist plays, but Chesterton finds him the least social of Socialists, and writes, "I pity the Socialist state that tries to manage him" (p. 178). Chesterton finds it difficult to imagine Shaw living in any country where conformity is enforced. Shaw did not care whether his ideas conformed to the age old traditions of man, so long as they conformed to the latest ideas of Marx. Yet Chesterton believed, in a state where to agree with Marx was to be a conformist, Shaw would not agree with Marx.

Shaw's influence is divided by Chesterton into six aspects: three bad and three good. The first bad influence that Shaw has had is the

encouragement of fastidiousness. By this Chesterton means that the reader or playgoer feels that Shaw has a distaste for the animal, and some of the distinctly human, aspects of man.

The second evil influence of Shaw has been to increase anarchy of thought; by this Chesterton means that Shaw has made it fashionable to rely on the judgement of posterity. Chesterton recognises that Shaw himself is a brave man, but to live in the future is the refuge of feeble spirits, and Shaw has encouraged such spirits.

The third evil influence is that Shaw has encouraged a kind of charlatanism of utterance. While it is all very well for Shaw himself to announce that he has utterly defeated some enemy, or to declare that only he can write such a brilliant play, it is not very well when shallower men copy his insolent certitude. Young charlatans have learned confidence from Shaw, but they have not learned his Irish charm.

The first good influence of Shaw was the re-popularization of philosophy. Chesterton deplores the two types of modern mystification: the mystification of journalists whose long words mean nothing, and the quiet mystification of strong silent men, who really have no thoughts to express.

> Against all this mystification both of silence and verbosity Shaw has been a splendid and smashing protest. He has stood up for the fact that philosophy is not the concern of those who pass through Divinity and Greats, but of those who pass through birth and death. Nearly all the most awful and abstruse statements can be put in words of one syllable, from "A child is born" to "A soul is damned." If the ordinary man may not discuss existence, why should he be asked to conduct it? (p. 242)

Shaw has defended the right of the non-specialist to speak on the specialized subject of philosophy; likewise, he has entered as a layman into the field of economics, and his plain and pugnacious style has

clarified many controversies.

The second good influence of Shaw has been to make amusements (especially drama) philosophic. Like Shakespeare, Shaw brings everything into his plays, often most undramatic material. So today a playwright may introduce anything into a play, from cookery to theology. "That," Chesterton remarks, "is being a philosopher; that is bringing the universe on the stage" (p. 251).

The third good influence of Shaw, and the influence that pleases Chesterton the most, is the obliteration of the mere cynic. Chesterton grew up in the latter years of the nineteenth century, he grew up hating the decadents who were tired of life; there were numerous things about Shaw's thought that Chesterton did not like, but Shaw was on the side of life, and therefore Chesterton considered him an ally. When Chesterton returns to George Bernard Shaw a quarter of a century after it was first published, and writes an extra chapter, he is delighted to be able to say that Shaw is still alive, and though practically an octogenarian, he is still lively and still on the side of life.

Chesterton sums up the weaknesses of Shaw by saying he had "the Prejudices of Progress" (p. 270). The reader should remember that Chesterton had the prejudices of tradition, and so he criticises Shaw from the traditionalist point of view, and writes that Shaw "had a less direct vision of the Future for having no direct tradition of the Past" (p. 272). This lack of tradition caused a lack of human sympathy.

> Where all normal Socialists professed fraternity with the working-classes, he wrote, "I have never had any feeling about the working-classes except a desire to abolish them, and replace them by sensible people." It is needless to explain that sensible people are always people who prefer water to wine, cabbages to cutlets, materialism to miracles, and utter subjection to a centralised government to any traditions of human liberty. (p. 291)

The last sentence is a typical piece of Chesterton writing; the wine, cutlets, and miracles are topics that occur frequently in his books; clearly Chesterton is viewing Shaw from the Chestertonian viewpoint, and he strikes on the fundamental weakness of the Fabians: their loss of contact with the common man. The chapter called "The Later Phases," written in 1935, is concerned with Shaw's lack of tradition. Chesterton does not restrict himself to the subject of Shaw, however, but discusses the Great War, and writes an essay on the relative merits of Progress and Christianity. He considers that Shaw's pacificism was due to his lack of a tradition; H. G. Wells shared many of Shaw's views, but when war came, the fact that Wells was the son of a cricketer, that he was a man with a tradition, meant that he, like Mr. Britling, saw it through. Shaw, on the other hand, lacking loyalty to any country, or any national tradition, was a pacifist.

Chesterton examines Shaw's idea of Progress in the light of Chesterton's idea of Christianity. In 1935 Chesterton thought that the events of the twentieth century had already progressed past Shaw's progressiveness. Shaw was an internationalist, yet in 1935 nationalism was resurgent. Shaw was a Socialist, yet in 1935 Facism was widespread. Shaw was an evolutionist, yet in 1935, Chesterton believed, the idea of evolution held by non-scientists had been proved untenable by science. Shaw placed his faith in the eventual arrival of the Superman, yet by 1935 the Superman had failed to appear. Shaw was a non-Christian, yet in 1935, according to Chesterton, Catholicism was the only religion and philosophy that could hold its own in the light of history and science. Chesterton's book on Shaw is thus to a large extent a debate between the author and his subject, between the Christian distributist and the

Progressive socialist; Chesterton admits as much: "this sketch is but a small skirmish in the great campaign between those two creeds" (p. 295).

FOOTNOTES -- CHAPTER IX

[1]G. K. Chesterton, George Bernard Shaw (London, 1961), pp. 33-34.

# CHAPTER X

## WILLIAM BLAKE

It would be possible to fit this chapter on Chesterton's William Blake into the pattern of this thesis. Blake was a contemporary of Cobbett, and Chesterton sees him opposing some of the things Cobbett opposed: Blake kicked a dragoon out of his garden -- Cobbett would have rejoiced to see him do it; Blake saw the horrors of industrialism and wished England to be a green and pleasant land -- so did Cobbett. But I have put Chesterton's study of Blake outside the pattern of this thesis for three reasons: first, because it was written for "the Popular Library of Art," and is not primarily concerned with Blake the writer; second, because much of the book is devoted to a discussion of mysticism and madness, and therefore does not fit readily into the pattern of Chesterton's view of religious and economic history that controlled his outlook on the other subjects of his literary studies, though Blake is used to illuminate Chesterton's own belief in a personal God; third, this book is the least satisfactory of Chesterton's works of literary criticism.[1] But in spite of these reasons I have chosen to consider the work in this thesis, for in a negative way it shows the limitations of Chesterton's highly unified approach to authors.

Chesterton begins by approving of Blake's mysticism, and by declaring that it was genuine mysticism. The particular marks of the true mystic that Chesterton emphasizes are the hatred of vagueness, and the natural attitude towards the supernatural. Blake shows the first of these

attributes in his art, which is always full of clear-cut lines and sweeping curves, and which always avoids fuzziness. The second attribute of the mystic is apparent in the way Blake complains about the kings and prophets who come to visit him: he uses the tone of voice employed by normal people grumbling about troublesome neighbours. Chesterton also observes that odd and unlikely people occur in Blake's visions, and regards this as one of the facts that makes the visions seem genuine.

After the discussion of Blake's mysticism Chesterton examines the pictures and poetry of his subject. A contemporary of Blake remarked that he was a very good person to plagiarize. Chesterton agrees with this idea, and points out that Blake packs a great deal of meaning into a small space. It would be possible to take a line of Blake's poetry, and expand it to twenty volumes. This density of meaning has a disadvantage, however, because it leads to obscurity.

Having examined Blake's mysticism and his approach to art, Chesterton shows Blake at work on the Canterbury Pilgrims. Mr. Cromek, the publisher immortalized in Blake's epigram:

> A petty sneaking knave I knew. . .
> Oh, Mr. Cromek, how do you do?

had commissioned Blake to do a design of Chaucer's pilgrims, and had then accepted Stothard's design. Chesterton admits that Stothard's picture judged as a picture was better than Blake's, but insists that because Blake the mystic knew about man and God and eternity, his pilgrims judged as people were better than Stothard's.

> Stothard, the elegant gentleman, the man of sensibility, the eighteenth century aesthete, cast his condescending eye upon the Middle Ages. He was of that age and school that only saw the Middle Ages by moonlight. Chaucer's Pilgrims were to him a quaint masquerade of hypocrisy or superstition, now only interesting from its

> comic or antiquated costume. The monk was amusing because he was fat, the wife of Bath because she was gay, the Squire because he was dandified, and so on. Blake knew as little about the Middle Ages as Stothard did; but Blake knew about eternity and about man; he saw the image of God under all garments. And in a rage which may really be called noble he tore in pieces Stothard's antiquarian frivolity, and asked him to look with more decent reverence at the great creations of a great poet. Stothard called the young Squire of Chaucer "a fop." Blake points out forcibly and with fine critical truth that the daintiness of the Squire's dress is the mere last touch to his youth, gaiety, and completeness; but that he was no fop at all, but a serious, chivalrous, and many-sided gentleman who enjoyed books, understood music, and was hardy and prompt in battle. Moreover, he is definitely described as humble, reverent, and full of filial respect. That such a man should be called a fop because of a frill or a feather Blake rightly regarded as a sign of the mean superficiality of his rival's ideas.

Chesterton goes on to describe how Blake ridiculed Stothard's ideas of the wife of Bath and the monk, and continues:

> Everywhere, in fact, he reminds his opponent that in entering the world of Chaucer he is not entering a fancy-dress ball, but a temple carved with colossal and eternal images of the gods of good and evil. Stothard was only interested in Chaucer's types because they were dead; Blake was interested in them because they cannot die.[2]

Many people have objected to the pedantry and specialized knowledge of experts. Chesterton points out that it is not the experts' knowledge, but their ignorance that causes the trouble. An eminent man of science when he thinks about politics, or art, or literature, will have the humdrum ideas of his own narrow social clique, unless he is more than an expert. Blake, like Michael Angelo, Leonardo de Vinci, and Rossetti, was not just an expert. Therefore he did not accept the romanticized contemporary view of what the people of the Middle Ages were like; he realized that Chaucer's pilgrims were eternal human beings, and not the fancy-dress figures drawn by Stothard. Here we can see Chesterton's own vision of the Middle Ages informing his criticism of Blake.

When Chesterton considers Blake's sanity, he rejects many obvious

reasons for calling him mad, but nevertheless decides that he was mad, because certain repetitive bad lines occur in his poetry. Chesterton believes that much of Blake's bad poetry was inspired poetry, inspired by angels, fallen angels.

> Now Blake was in the most reckless, and sometimes even in the most vulgar, sense a spiritualist. He threw the doors of his mind open to what the late George Macdonald called in a fine phrase "the canaille of the other world." I think it is impossible to look at some of the pictures which Blake drew, under what he considered direct spiritual dictation, without feeling that he was from time to time under influences that were not only evil but even foolishly evil. (p. 100)

Before a reader can accept this sort of comment from Chesterton, he must more or less agree with Chesterton's view of the cosmos. The reader who does not believe in spirits will find the quotation above completely unenlightening about Blake: it will only expose Chesterton's views.

The philosophy and theology of Blake were dogmatic, says Chesterton the dogmatist. Much of the theology was inherited from the Gnostics, or from the mad Franciscan followers of Joachim de Flor, or from other heretics.

> Very few modern people would know an Akamoth or an AEon if they saw him. Yet one would really have to be on rather intimate terms with these old mystical gods and demons before one could move quite easily in the Cosmos which was familiar to Blake. (pp. 158-159)

Yet Blake's theology is strictly his own. Blake and Wordsworth have often been compared because they both wrote about babies and sheep, but Chesterton says that if Wordsworth was the Poet of Nature, Blake was the Poet of Anti-Nature. He set his own eternal images against the appearances of Nature. Blake's tiger is an eternal tiger. Therefore Chesterton sees Blake as a type of Neo-Platonist.

The great weakness of Blake, as far as Chesterton is concerned, was

that he was a heretic, or in twentieth century terms a faddist. Chesterton defines the heretic, not as someone who necessarily teaches falsehood, but as someone who prefers his own little bit of truth to the essential and eternal truths of "orthodoxy;" the heretic sets up the mood against the mind. Blake's heresies included: the insistence that war as war is evil, the belief in nudity, and the belief that Christ's death was a confession of weakness. Chesterton says that these examples and the other fads of Blake, "are all cases in which Blake ceased to be a poet, through becoming entirely, instead of only partially, separated from the people" (p. 180). Here again we can see Chesterton's doctrine: vox populi, vox Dei, influencing his criticism.

Having given his opinion of the bad side of Blake's philosophy, Chesterton is able to go on to state what he considers to be the good side: "It consisted in its placid and positive defiance of materialism" (p. 183). Then Chesterton divides non-materialistic philosophers into three broad divisions: first, the Christians, second, the Asiatic philosophers who wish to unify and simplify the diversified and complex universe and to depersonalize God, and third, the Platonists; Blake fits into the last category. For Chesterton, Blake's value consists in defying the materialists and the "Asiatics." Chesterton writes of Blake:

> He was on the side of historic Christianity on the fundamental question on which it confronts the East; the idea that personality is the glory of the universe and not its shame; that creation is higher than evolution, because it is more personal; that the forgiveness of sins is essential to the communion of saints; and the resurrection of the body to the life everlasting. It was a mark of the old eastern initiations, it is still a mark of the grades and planes of our theosophical thinkers, that as a man climbs higher and higher, God becomes to him more and more formless, ethereal, and even thin. And in many of these temples, both ancient and modern, the final reward of serving the god through vigils and

> purifications, is that one is at last worthy to be told that the god doesn't exist.
>
> Against all this emasculate mysticism Blake like a Titan rears his colossal figure and his earthquake voice. Through all the cloud and chaos of his stubborn symbolism and his perverse theories, through the tempest of exaggeration and the full midnight of madness, he reiterates with passionate precision that only that which is lovable can be adorable, that deity is either a person or a puff of wind, that the more we know of higher things, the more palpable and incarnate we shall find them; that the form filling the heavens is the likeness of the appearance of a man. (pp. 209-210)

Chesterton's book on Blake gives a very personal view of its subject. The greatest weakness of the book is caused by Chesterton reading Blake's symbols too literally.[3]

In his other books of literary criticism, with the exception of George Bernard Shaw, Chesterton was able to portray his subjects as being more or less in agreement with his own philosophy, but he had to admit that Shaw and Blake were not Chestertonians. He said that if Shaw lived for three hundred years he would become a Catholic; he had to allow Blake a thousand years.

FOOTNOTES -- CHAPTER X

[1]Christopher Hollis suggests the cause of the poor quality of William Blake: "Blake also was a failure because Chesterton's weapon was reason and he could not be at home with one who despised reason." G. K. Chesterton, (London, 1950), p. 10.

[2]William Blake, pp. 51-55.

[3]See S. Foster Damon, William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols (Gloucester, Massachusetts, 1958). Damon writes, "We can imagine for ourselves what absurdities literalists like G. K. Chesterton have written of Blake's appeal for light!" (p. 274)

# CHAPTER XI

## CONCLUSION

Chesterton's cohesive approach to literature was controlled by his attitude to history, economics, politics, and, ultimately, by his attitude to God and man. He thought that the rich had duped the poor in the sixteenth century: had stolen their monasteries (the hospitals and schools of the middle ages), had undermined the economic stability provided by the guilds, and had imposed an unwelcome religion. The rich also took over the universities, and so were able to ensure that the history books written during the next three centuries contained a version of England's story that covered up the social injustices which had been, and were being, perpetrated by the "establishment." Chesterton the critic sees Cobbett, Dickens, and Shaw as three writers who exposed the "crimes of England." Chaucer is used by Chesterton as an enormous piece of evidence that proves that mediaeval England was, at least potentially, a sounder society than the England of the last three hundred and fifty years. Browning, Stevenson, and Blake are used to show that an optimistic attitude to man is tenable, and preferable to a mood of sad despair. It is clear then, that Chesterton's unique contribution as a literary critic is this new angle from which an author can be seen.

The fact that one can write Chesterton "used" an author shows his most serious limitation. He rarely paints a complete picture of his subject, rather he sketches a caricature; and it is the purpose of a

caricature to distort certain features of its subject. Many readers refuse to accept Chesterton's picture of an author because they recognize it as being incomplete, but if these readers would admit it as a caricature they would gain a greater understanding of the subject. It is because so many readers are annoyed by Chesterton's distortions that his approach to literature has not been very widely influential, but his method of approach -- the seeing of all writers in the light of his own philosophy -- is important.

Chesterton the critic reminds us of many critics who have written from a special and unified point of view, and of how much criticism is a kind of special pleading. In previous centuries we find such men as Dryden, Johnson, and Matthew Arnold; in our own century T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, George Orwell, John Middleton Murry, F. R. Leavis, and the Marxists (for example, Arnold Kettle) have all had an axe to grind. Indeed, it is because the writing of these critics is so often special pleading that it is so readable. Because discussion of a work of art can never be entirely objective an obviously subjective critic is often less misleading than one who purports to be detached. In addition a reader is often more interested in what a critic felt about a writer than in mere facts.

## II

As a consequence of this thesis we can now see Chesterton as a certain type of critic, belonging to certain developments in the late nineteenth century and twentieth century criticism. In the last chapter of The Literary Critics George Watson divides contemporary criticism into

three main categories: the Moralists, the New Critics, and the Historians. Clearly Chesterton does not belong with the New Critics, who practise close textual analysis. Is he then a Moralist or a Historian? Watson describes the Moralists as

> the prophetic figures in modern criticism. They most readily excite discipleship. Their influence may even extend to matters of conduct; in some cases, indeed (as in Lawrence and Orwell) the critical interest is a late extension of some wider moral purpose. They are self-righteously non-professional, they tend (however scholarly in themselves) to despise scholarship. . ..[1]

Chesterton is certainly a Moralist. But he also has some of the characteristics of one branch of the Historians. Watson writes of the Historians:

> . . .two strands seem visible in the complex pattern of largely academic historiography as it has been practised on both sides of the Atlantic. The one is largely Christian, the other largely Marxist and ex-Marxist. The Christian tradition is essentially British — Anglican, indeed -- and has powerful medieval affinities, emerging from the ruck of late Victorian editing of medieval texts into an astonishingly clear light. . .R. W. Chambers. . .as a devoted Anglican, sought to establish a sense of continuity between modern England and its medieval, catholic past. . .. (p. 224)

So we may conclude that Chesterton is a Moralist critic with some of the Historians' interests, and as such his opinions will have to be taken into consideration by future scholars. Doubtless these future scholars will recognise his limitations just as twentieth century scholars recognise the limitations of Dr. Johnson's approach to Shakespeare; but just as critics return to Johnson for integrated literary criticism, so they will return to Chesterton.

## III

Now that we have placed Chesterton in relation to certain groups of twentieth century literary critics, we may attempt to estimate the

significance of Chesterton's criticism, not so much in terms of the validity of his views, as in terms of his contribution to certain currents of ideas and critical approaches in this century.

It is, of course, impossible to be certain of the nature of a writer's influence on others. Chesterton's books have sold by the million, and we can never know all the mute inglorious readers who have been affected by him. It is possible, however, to say without doubt that English-speaking Catholics, particularly converts, have absorbed many of Chesterton's general views, and it seems probable that they have also been swayed by some of his literary opinions. Among Chesterton's readers who write, one can observe some authors who adopt many Chestertonian views. It is hardly necessary to document the effect that Chesterton has had on Hilaire Belloc, Ronald Knox, Alfred Noyes, Maurice Baring, C. S. Lewis, Jack Squire, Vincent McNabb, and Arnold Lunn, but before one can claim that certain other writers owe anything to Chesterton some evidence is needed.

Evelyn Waugh is such an author. In The Road to Damascus Waugh takes a view identical with that of Chesterton:

> England was Catholic for nine hundred years, then Protestant for three hundred, then agnostic for a century. The Catholic structure still lies lightly buried beneath every phase of English life; history, topography, law, archeology, everywhere reveal Catholic origins. Foreign travel anywhere (in Europe) reveals the local, temporary character of the heresies and schisms and the universal, eternal character of the Church.[2]

Waugh's attitude to literature is, apparently different from that of Chesterton; Waugh does not approve of books concerned with 'ideas', 'opinions', 'points of view', and 'programmes'. On the other hand, Chesterton said that he would never be a novelist because he liked to see

the ideas wrestling naked. But Waugh is a satirist, and a satirist cannot help but be concerned with ideas. The fact that Waugh has lectured on Chesterton at American universities is additional evidence of his interest.

Graham Greene is another novelist who is interested in Chesterton, and who shares some of Chesterton's interests. Greene's delight in children's stories and boys' comics, his concern for religious literature, his statement that "After the death of Henry James. . .the religious sense was lost to the English novel. . . "[3], his concern for a religious framework for the novel, his choice of Catholic subjects, his criticism, and his allusions to Chesterton's criticism, all suggest the same fundamental attitudes that we find in Chesterton's works -- and surely this is not an entirely accidental resemblance.

Even more than in the cases of Waugh and Greene it is necessary to produce some evidence before we can claim that George Orwell owed anything to Chesterton. Christopher Hollis, who knew both Chesterton and Orwell personally, writes: "Chesterton had been a hero of Orwell's youth, of whose hero-worship he afterwards grew a little ashamed. He was ever coming back to him, if only to disagree with him. He could not let him alone."[4] It would appear that Orwell's view of the characteristics of the English people owes much to his reading of Chesterton; the following passage will make this clear:

> The genuinely popular culture of England is something that goes on beneath the surface, unofficially and more or less frowned on by the authorities. One thing one notices if one looks directly at the common people, especially in the big towns, is that they are not puritanical. . .. One can learn a good deal about the spirit of England from the comic coloured postcards that you see in the windows of cheap stationers' shops. These things are a

> sort of diary upon which the English people have unconsciously recorded themselves. Their old-fashioned outlook, their graded snobberies, their mixture of bawdiness and hypocrisy, their extreme gentleness, their deeply moral attitude to life, are all mirrored there.[5]

George Watson includes the following names in his list of twentieth century moralist critics: D. H. Lawrence, John Middleton Murry, George Orwell, F. R. Leavis, G. Wilson Knight, Yvor Winters, Richard Hoggart, and Raymond Williams; to this list we may add Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, and C. S. Lewis. Clearly then, the moralist line is already influential, and it appears that it will grow yet more important as the impact of new criticism, with its concentrated textual approach, wears off. Jung has suggested that the psychic ills of modern man are caused by a division between the sensual and the spiritual man. A spiritual rebirth is required; that is, a reassessment of the modern man's values in order "to bring meaning once more into life. . .."[6] If there is anything at all in this suggestion -- and when one considers the work of Camus, Orwell, the proletarian novelists in England, and the anarchist poets in America there appears to be some force to what Jung is saying -- then Chesterton will surely appear as a larger figure on the literary horizon than he has in the past twenty-five years, partly because he stood uncompromisingly for a moralist approach to literature. Whatever is thought of the particular outlook on life which informs all Chesterton's work, it is now possible to admit more readily than in the past that his method is one which enlarges the concerns and aims of the critic.

FOOTNOTES -- CHAPTER XI

[1]George Watson, *The Literary Critics: A Study of English Descriptive Criticism* (Harmondsworth, 1962), pp. 218-219.

[2]Quoted in *Evelyn Waugh: Portrait of an Artist*, Frederick J. Stopp (London, 1958), pp. 29-30.

[3]"Francois Mauriac," *The Lost Childhood and other Essays*.

[4]Christopher Hollis, *A Study of George Orwell* (London, 1956), p. 175.

[5]George Orwell, *England Your England and Other Essays* (London, 1954), p. 197.

[6]C. G. Jung, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, trans. W. S. Dell and Cary F. Baynes (New York, 1933), p. 239.

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# APPENDIX

# APPENDIX

## DISTRIBUTISM

Distributism was never a completely clear cut idea, and there were many quarrels among the members of the Distributist League. However, in broad outline the principles of Distributism were:

1. The encouragement of the small proprietor, the peasant, the small shopkeeper, the craftsman using his own tools, and the self-employed.
2. The discouragement of big business, and both capitalist monopolies and state monopolies.
3. The encouragement of the idea of the guild: tradesmen banded together for mutual protection and the protection of their customers.
4. The fostering of individual personal freedom, and the discouragement of government interference. Even if the government was benevolent, Chesterton considered that too much interference would produce, and was producing, a form of slavery.
5. The encouragement of the family; after the individual the family was considered the most important unit in society.
6. The discouragement of advertising. The vulgarities of big business were thought to have debased everything: Chesterton looked at the lights of Broadway and remarked, "'What a glorious garden of wonders this would be, to any one who was lucky enough to be unable to read.'"[1]

FOOTNOTES -- APPENDIX

[1]G. K. Chesterton, What I Saw in America (London, 1922), p. 33.

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